Journey into Burmese Silence

Marie B. Byles

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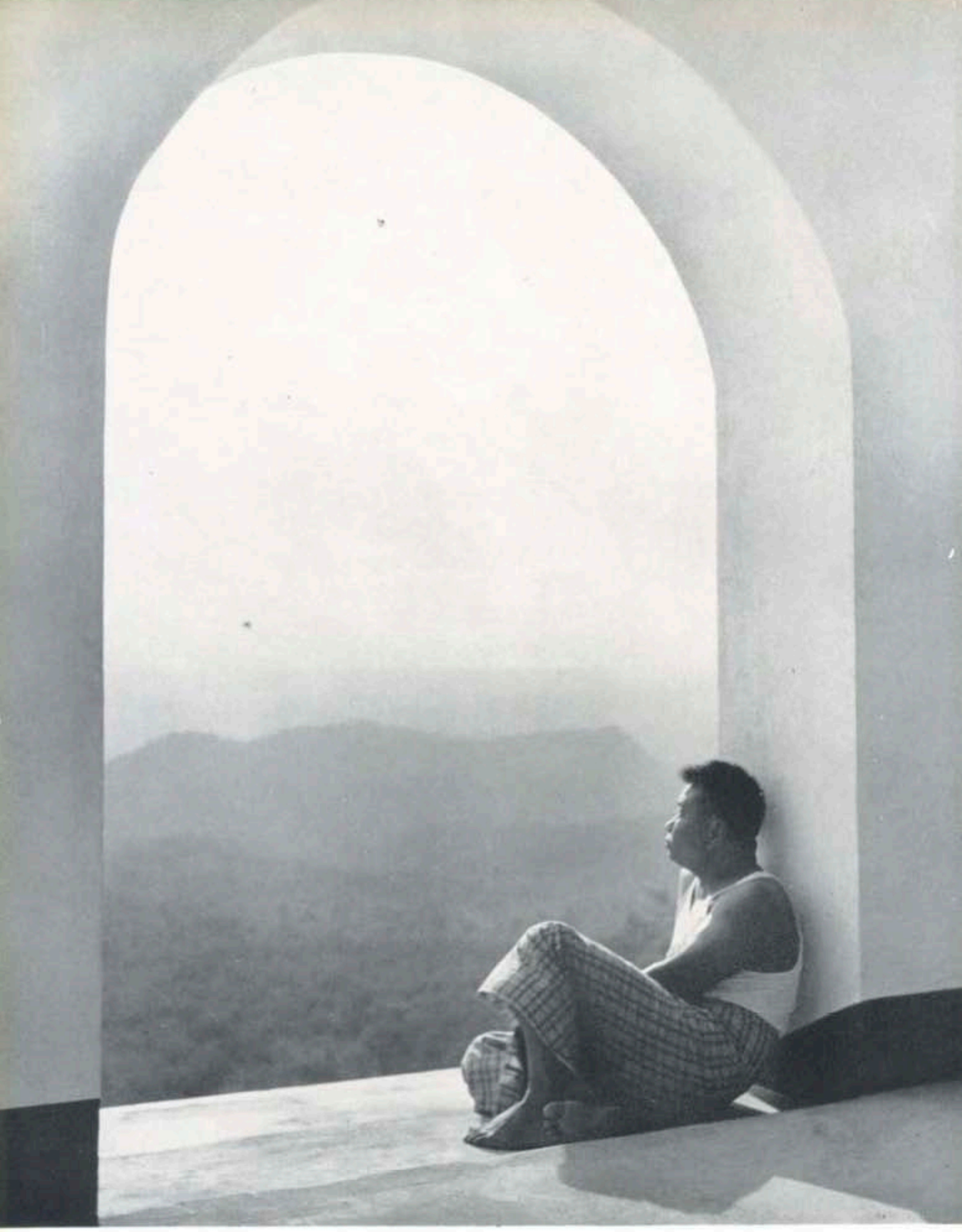
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The Peace of the Pagoda *(photo: U Kyaw Win)*

JOURNEY INTO BURMESE SILENCE

By

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those who made the Burmese adventures possible. The names are arranged alphabetically, not in order of merit, for the merit of their kindness they have long since distributed Buddhist-wise among all sentient beings:

U Aye Bo, the host and adopted younger brother.

Daw Nyunt, the temporal head of the Maha Bodhi Centre.

Sayalay Daw Saranawati, the interpreter and companion.

Saya U Thein, the Instructor in meditation and spiritual head of the Centre.

Daw Toke Gale, who came to Sydney and started everything.

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

The mind is its own place, and in it self
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.
(Milton)

This is the account of the search for a quiet retreat in which to learn the art of meditation, that is, of how to still the thoughts and find the insight that lies beyond intellect. It tells of the ultimate finding of such a retreat at the Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre in Burma, and of life at this and other Burmese meditation centres.

Although the quest did not bear fruit until the end of 1957, it probably unconsciously started nearly twenty years before, when Burma was visited in quest, not of meditation, but of mountains. So the book begins with this, and also tells of an unsuccessful search both in Burma and India in 1953 and 1954.

The type of meditation practised in Burma is known as Vipassana or insight meditation, and the people who practise it are known as yogis. This use of the term 'yogi' is etymologically correct, although not commonly found in Buddhist text books.

The last chapter is an attempt to examine some aspects of Vipassana meditation in relation to Jung's theories, and also in relation to innate egoism. It concludes with an examination as to whether a teacher is necessary in order to learn Vipassana meditation, and a simple preliminary exercise suitable for 'Westerners.

The Appendix is a translation by my Buddhist nun friend, Sayalay Daw Saranawati, of the booklet of instructions in the Vipassana method practised at Maha Bodhi. It is published with the permission of Saya U Thein, the Instructor at this Centre.

It goes without saying that I am convinced from my own experience that the practise of Vipassana meditation, coupled with training in the other steps of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, provides a practical way for finding deliverance from suffering here and now. I am also convinced that this way to zest, calm, peace and happiness, is open to anyone who is prepared to undertake the training and pay the price demanded. Embracing Buddhism or any other religion is not, however, part of that price.

Grateful thanks are tendered to the Burmese friends to whom this book is dedicated and whose kindness made the adventures possible, also to my old friend, Erika Wohlwil, to whom *Footprints of Gautama the Buddha* was dedicated and who read the present MS as she read the earlier one, and thereby greatly improved it; to Beryl Ross who helped in a similar way; to Dorothy Hasluck who improved the spelling and to Jean Maddocks who planned the dust cover. The best of the photos are the work of U Aye Bo, who adopted me as his elder sister. I am deeply grateful to him for having taken them and allowed them to be used. That the other photos are better than I have been taking of recent years, is due to my friend, Alan Hull, and his advice concerning cameras and photography generally.

The verse and portions of the last chapter have already appeared in the *Maha Bodhi* journal and *World Buddhism* and these journals are acknowledged accordingly.

Finally I record my gratitude to Clem Cleveson who read the proofs and to Gerald Yorke who painfully read a preliminary draft MS and offered suggestions which radically altered and improved it.

Acknowledgment is made to Messrs Luzac & Company Limited for permission to quote one paragraph from each of Compendium of Philosophy *and* The Book of Kindred Sayings, Vol. 1

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

THE QUEST

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends
> Rough-hew them how we will.
> (Shakespeare)

Meditation and Yoga were terms wholly unknown to me until the middle of my life. Until then, apart from legal work, there was only one dominant objective, the Climbing of mountain peaks, especially virgin mountain peaks, and supreme among them was Mount Sansato in China, 20,000 feet high, towering like the wing of a white dragon above the great S-shaped bend of the Yangtze River near the borders of Tibet.

After some difficulty five other people were induced to join me in 1938 in an attempt to scale this mountain. There were two main routes for reaching Mount Sansato. The shortest and easiest lay through Indo China. But a strange urge made me map the longer and more devious route through Upper Burma and over the Kambaiti Pass. The reason that suggested itself to justify this longer route, was that the Japanese war upon China was spreading westward. But this did not prevent planning the return trip through the danger zone of Indo China. It would seem that an introduction to Burma and Buddhism was what the divinity that shapes our ends, demanded.

I knew nothing of Buddha or Buddhism and was not the slightest bit interested in Buddhist pagodas. But, as it happened, just before we reached Rangoon there had been rioting between Moslems and Buddhists, and the British Chief of Police warned us of the danger of visiting the chief tourist attraction, the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. As soon as he talked about danger, I suddenly developed an interest in Buddhist pagodas. One of the attractions

of mountaineering is its dangerous adventures, and here was a minor adventure offering before even leaving Rangoon. So, between arranging for Chinese currency and visas and purchasing canvas boots, camp cots and such like, the more venturesome of us crammed in a visit to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. The Chief of Police reluctantly provided two young Christian students as an escort. The perilous expedition had to be made barefoot, and most of the party carefully washed their feet in antiseptic and put sticking plaster on the soles. But the pagoda turned out to be very clean, being constantly washed down by the faithful in quest of merit, said our escort.

We were told how Buddhists did not pray but only meditated, and there was an actual skeleton in a cupboard to encourage meditation on the transiency of life. We were also told about the precepts which lay people take at the moon's quarters. I was greatly impressed by the fact that they were sensible ones, like not telling untruths, instead of ones about not committing murder towards which I had never had the least inclination. The young men further explained that though no educated Buddhist prayed, yet the ignorant did pray, and they showed us a little shrine to the Nats on the outskirts of the pagoda compound.

The Shwe Dagon Pagoda left behind the impression of a universal church with room within it for all sorts and conditions of people from those who merely meditated to those who supplicated the spirits of inanimate nature. And again I was impressed. But I still have a memory of a woman tourist from the West pondering over one of the pictures of scenes from the Buddha's life and asking if we could elucidate it. How strange, I thought, that Westerners should take the trouble to be interested in such matters!

The train journey to northern Burma was of absorbing interest—brightly-coloured crowds of smiling people, food for sale to passengers carried in glass containers on the heads of station attendants, gay longyis, cylindrical pieces of material hooked at the side in the case of men and in front in the case of women, and little boys skilfully climbing trees despite the impediment of

skirts. White people we met in Rangoon were unpleasantly contemptuous of the Burmese, but they were a happy smiling folk and I loved them and decided they must be among the most delightful people mother earth has produced. And that was an impression I did not need to revise when I later lived among them.

The first day took us through green rice-lands with white pagodas taking the place of the cottages one sees in England. But when we woke at Mandalay we had passed into a drier zone. The train was to wait there an hour, so we took a taxi to inspect the ruins of the ancient city, and view Mandalay Hill with hundreds of roofed-over steps leading up through many shrines to the top. Twenty years later every evening for a month from the silence of a Buddhist meditation centre, I was to see the setting sun falling on these sacred shrines, now lit by dawn. But if any one had now told me that I was watching the curtain falling on the close of the first scene of a journey into that silence, I should have laughed at him, for mountains then formed the only drama of any interest.

The day after, we were met at Myitkyina by what appeared to be hordes of robbers, but turned out to be merely coolies desiring to carry our luggage. There was the first stay at a Dak bungalow, the kindness of Baptist missionaries, and then the crossing of the Irrawaddy River, on the further side of which we left wheeled traffic behind for the next five months. Our luggage was loaded on to mules, and for four days we tramped through lush green forests where trees were hung with creepers and the air heavy with the moisture of rain and the heat of summer. We topped Kambaiti Pass 8,000 feet high, and in one stride left behind the forests and the primitive Kachin tribes of Upper Burma. We dropped down into China, and a grassy land sprinkled with pine trees, the land of an ancient civilization where stone footpaths had been worn down by the tramp of sandalled feet throughout the ages, and where women still tottered on bound feet. After about three weeks' journey, we came to within fifty miles of the borders of Tibet, the home of the Nashi people where the women carried home from market huge pieces of furniture, while the men carried home a little basket with a vegetable or an egg or two.

It was fun, great fun, this journey through little-known China, and hopes ran high for the conquest of a virgin mountain peak, 20,000 feet high, whose foot we had now reached.

Three months later we came down from the high snows. We had failed. Mount Sansato, the Wing of White Dragon, rose into the azure sky as pure and virgin as before. The failure was the end of the plans of two years and the aspirations of ten. I had desired something passionately, and not having got it, the weariness of life seemed a burden too heavy to be borne.

Whether this absurd suffering had anything to do with it, I do not know, but apparently what Eastern people would call ripening 'karma' took effect, and on the return to Australia in 1939 there developed a strange interest in moral and spiritual values, things for which, as a University student in the early twenties, I had a supreme contempt. If others suggested people might be swayed by loving kindness, we dismissed the idea as Victorian nonsense and turned away to hide our embarrassed blushes. People were governed by the laws of supply and demand, purchasing power parity and that sort of thing. Then the local Congregational Minister happened along and I found myself slinking to his church. No member of a respectable family starting to engage in the sly grog traffic could have been more afraid of being found out. Three years later an unsuccessful foot operation put an end to any further mountaineering or tramping, and so took away the things in life most treasured. The need for spiritual and moral values to give meaning to life, became doubly necessary, more especially as the body went steadily downhill and there followed about thirteen years of ill-health and suffering, both physical and spiritual.

During this period there grew up an interest in meditation, the art of stilling the thoughts and discovering what lies beyond the senses and beyond intellect. When the way opened in 1953 for a year's holiday, there were three objectives and one was to find a quiet ashram where meditation might be mastered. I was sceptical as to the value of a 'guru' upon which India insisted, and interested in Burmese Buddhist meditation which appeared

more scientific in its approach than that of India, if only because the term 'God' was not mentioned, a term which because of the conditioning of University days, still brought a feeling of uneasiness, even though it was perfectly clear by now that it was the meaning behind the word that mattered, not the word itself.

However, as the first two objectives lay in India, it was to India that the passage was booked with the hope that when the boat called in at Rangoon, the way to a Burmese meditation centre would open up, more especially as I had there an Australian friend interested in meditation.

In November 1953, the boat arrived at Rangoon. Since 1938 the town had been partly wrecked by bombing, and the Burmese had attained independence. They had thrust out all things British in a far more drastic manner than had India, and they had no Mahatma Gandhi to give his life for peace between warring parties. Because of these things and the aftermath of the Japanese occupation, the country appeared to be in a turmoil. As the boat had at least a week in port, there was ample time to see something of Burmese Buddhist meditation. I hoped even to meet an arahat or saint. The turmoil of mediaeval Europe had been the breeding ground for saints, and in view of the seriousness with which meditation was said to be now taken, it seemed that the same might be the case in Burma. But when it was not considered safe even to leave Rangoon, thousands of saints would not have been of any help to the seeker for one.

This Australian friend, David Maurice, who had embraced Buddhism very wholeheartedly, took me to a little monastery where he had studied meditation, but the Instructor under whom he had studied was dead. It was built of bamboo, cool and pleasant, and I did my best to follow his example in 'paying respect' to the phongyi, or monk, in charge; this means going down on your knees, putting your palms on the floor and your face on top of your hands—three times over. There is a good deal more to it than that in folding the palms together when you bob up and down, but that is enough to show why I never managed to do it without an inward giggle, even though four

years later I developed the technique sufficiently well to pass in a crowd. Probably the gesture of a man 'paying respect' to an insignificant good-for-nothing young woman by lifting his hat—if he wears a hat—is not more ludicrous, but one takes for granted one's own funny customs.

Of course we had to 'do' the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. But this time there was no cool rain to wash the pavements nor any heathen Europeans to suggest sticking plaster on the soles of the feet. The sun burned down mercilessly from a brazen sky and the pavements were like heated iron. We sat for a little while at the feet of one of the Buddha statues. Beside me a woman repeated the Three Refuges while she told her rosary beads. We might have been a at Catholic Church, except that the woman sat on her heels instead of kneeling, and instead of 'Hail Mary! Pray for us!' she was saying, 'I go to the Buddha for refuge! I go to the Dhamma for refuge! I go to the Sangha for refuge!' The troubled heart seeks refuge under different names, but it is the same refuge it finds. We finally left the burning pavements and entered the cool leafy shade where we saw a nun addressing a group of devotees. She was said to have 15,000 followers.

We next went to the large meditation centre where we inspected pleasant bamboo huts and a brand new row of concrete cells not nearly so attractive. I should have liked to spend some time there and learn something of the method employed, but apparently this was not possible. The best that could be done was to arrange to photograph some of the meditating monks. They wended their way along the path with orange parasols to protect their shaven heads, and gathered on the steps of the Ordination Hall in strict order of priority and seniority within the Order. It was all very formal and a little frightening.

After the fire-walking ordeal that day, I woke next morning with feet so swollen and painful that I could hardly put them to the ground. However, by dint of packing them in ice for an hour I was able to keep an appointment with Francis Storey, who was to take me to a nunnery. Burmese men and women are very alike in figure and when their heads are shaven, they are more alike still. However, in Burma the nuns do not dress in orange like the

monks, but in a colour which might be described as apricot or pale salmon pink. Francis Storey gave it as his opinion that there was far more genuine devotion among nuns than monks. No special respect is paid to them as it is to monks, and they are not members of the Sangha or Order as they were in the Buddha's day. They are humble, ordinary folk. Perhaps for this very reason, those we met were altogether charming. The nuns we read of in the Pali Texts quite frequently had been married women and even courtesans, but these were all celibate since birth, and their ages ranged from seven to ninety years. The head nun, who was fifty-nine, had a look of great sweetness and inner peace seemed to shine from her eyes. 'Yes, nuns were sometimes arahats in the Buddha's day,' she said sadly, 'but not now.' As I looked at her I felt she might be near to being an arahat herself. They slept only three to four hours at night and spent the rest in meditation. But during the day they meditated for only short twenty-minute periods after worshipping at the shine. They occupied the rest of the time mainly in reciting the Abhidhamma, the lists and categories of the contents of the human mind, in other words a psychology text book, which, however, has also the authority of Holy Writ. As some of them were only very little girls, perhaps they were chanting one of the simpler passages as we came in, for example:

'In the summary of bases, what are called "bases" are of six kinds, to wit, the bases: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and heart. In the Kamaloka all these obtain. In the world of Rupa there exist no bases of smell, taste or touch. In the world of Arupa none of the bases exist.

'Now the five elements of sense-cognition proceed wholly and solely in dependence on the five sense-organs and their respective bases. But the elements of mind—that is to say, adverting, and reception of the five-door impressions proceed solely in dependence on the heart. The element of mind-consciousness...' (*Compendium of Philosophy*, p. 122.)

If you know anything of Pali and Buddhist terminology this is a passage perfectly easy to follow. But most are not nearly so simple. It seemed a strangely uninspiring way to inner peace and Nirvana.

No offer of meditation practice being forthcoming, the last day was spent at the Sulay Pagoda, watching people coming in and out, much as in a Catholic Church in the lunch-hour. Men and women would come up the steps, prostrate themselves with foreheads to the ground, offer flowers and incense, and then sit for a short time on the floor, perhaps repeating the Refuges or looking at the storied frieze around the top of the walls and saying to themselves the story it told. A few merely sat in silence. In the shrine where I sat, there was Devadatta pictured as hurling the huge rock with the intention of killing the Buddha, but the Blessed One continued sitting cross-legged teaching his disciples. Then there was Devadatta arranging with the keepers to release the man-slaying elephant, but the Happy One suffused him with rays of loving thought, and in the next picture you saw the tamed elephant bowing at the Buddha's feet. Whatever the theme, the storied friezes always had at their centre the figure of the Buddha serene and happy amid the sorrows of the world.

One of the passengers told us what great pleasure it had given him to visit the large Anglican Church and find the regimental colours of the troops that had worshipped there during two world wars. There are no regimental colours, nor any Burmese patriotic symbols in Buddhist pagodas. There are only statues and pictures of the serenely Happy One sitting or walking unperturbed and radiating love, tranquillity and happiness, and you know that however far his devotees have fallen from his teaching, they have never desecrated his shrines with memories of bloodshed.

These days in Rangoon left behind a memory of light, joyousness and colour. There are no—

> Storied windows richly dight,
>
> Casting a dim religious light,

but shrines open to the fresh air and sunlight, and gaily adorned with gold and silver and coloured things, and little

umbrellas brought by the worshippers, as well as flowers, candles and incense, and always that serene figure of peace and happiness—quiet, happy places where one may retire from the world a little while and catch a glimpse of the peace the Buddha knew.

Had the way to the study of meditation opened up in Burma, I should have returned there. But it did not. The boat proceeded to India, mystic India, and I remained there a year.

The boat drew into Calcutta and was greeted with welcoming faces for the other passengers, but for me only a sheaf of letters showing that all hopeful contacts with quiet ashrams had failed. I took a taxi to the Rama Krishna Mission which had kindly arranged hospitality with a wealthy business man and his charming wife, who, however, did not speak English so that her husband acted as both host and hostess. He told me that for the Hindu the guest is God. This guest did not feel the least like God, but only a little embarrassed and very depressed.

Many believe that Rama Krishna was one of the bodies that God makes for himself in various ages and there is no doubt that the Rama Krishna Mission, established by his chief disciple, Vivekananda, is among the vitalizing forces in India today. Even Europeans admit this and admire its orphanages, schools and hospitals, while in the West it has been one of the principal means of making Eastern thought known, especially the practice of meditation. In India, however, it has only one meditation centre of note, that of Mayavaiti in the Himalaya Hills near Almora, and Burma having failed, I had it in mind that I might end up there after the Buddist pilgrimage and the visit to Gandhi's ashram at Sevegram had been completed.

The Secretary of the Rama Krishna Mission in Calcutta very kindly took me to Belur Math, the large monastery on the banks of the Ganges, where Vivekananda had established the Order, where I met two Brahmacharinis, or novice nuns. They belonged

to the Californian Vedanta group and had been ‘studying’ under the Rama Krishna Swami, or Teacher, in Bangalore, that is to say practising the spiritual way to the accompaniment, I gathered, of much ritual and ceremony, or puja. There was no residential ashram and they had lived in rooms in the town. From what they said, it was obviously not the place for me!

We had lunch together in the monastery dining room, where a curtain screens the men from the women, and where of course, we sat on the floor on mats and ate with our fingers. The man serving first brought the prasad, or food which had been offered at Rama Krishna’s altar, and then the usual yellow-coloured vegetable stew devoid of all individual taste, and we ended with curd. After the meal, the leaf-plates and clay bowls are thrown away and one washes one’s foody right hand—the left is unclean and must not be allowed to touch food. All women were then strictly turned out of the temple and monastery grounds for the noonday siesta—though there would be nothing to prevent them from landing at the steps down to the Ganges. After this it was arranged that I should have an audience with Maharaj, the head of the institution. I was carefully coached in spiritual etiquette, and how to go down with my face on the floor and take the first hint to depart. The girls made me dreadfully nervous, and when first the handbag, and then the camera went ‘plonk-plonk’! on the boards, my embarrassment was complete. I told him my idea of going to Mayavaiti. He did not encourage it. Bangalore was the place for me. He appeared to be humble and gentle, but wholly without insight into the needs of a middle-aged Australian woman. I bowed my way out via head on the floor, at the first lull in the conversation.

I felt a little lonely when I said goodbye to the two white-robed brahmacharinis. They would travel through India safe in the arms of their Mother Church with everything arranged for them. But I would not know from day to day what would happen and there would never be anyone to take care of me. The body was still far from well and the disintegrating power of self-pity made it worse.

The next attempt to find a quiet ashram was far stranger than the first. ‘Your telephone,’ said my hostess, who probably knew more English than she admitted. It was Govinda Das, whose name had been given by a chance correspondent from England. He and his guru were passing through Calcutta. Miss Maitri, a lady met at the mission, came as interpreter. We were taken by car to a village called Bali, picking up on the way several university ‘professors’ who looked extremely young to be professors, but I later found that every lecturer in Calcutta is a ‘professor’— my host was a professor because he lectured three times a week to engineering students.

We were met by a prosperous business man with a wide sash round his waist and nothing above it, and by several charming women, who ceaselessly reiterated, ‘We are so very happy to have you here!’ They took us to a quiet bedroom where we removed our sandals before being led into the presence of His Holiness. On the way we met Govinda Das, all smiles, a funny beard, long hair, a loin cloth, a rosary of huge wooden beads and two white marks on his forehead to indicate his sect. Ceaseless chanting and singing had been coming from the back premises and now we were ushered into a huge canvas pavilion and led down a parting made in the ranks of the devotees to two seats placed beside His Holiness. I knew I ought to have gone down on my face but had not the courage to do so and neither had Miss Maitri, who, it later turned out, was not enjoying the adventure at all; she was thoroughly Westernized and rather ashamed of this typical Indian scene. The Guru was dressed like his disciple, but he did not seem to radiate the same smiling graciousness. The air was filled with the ceaseless beating of drums, the chanting of ‘Hari Om! Hari Om!’ and the breath of the crowd pressing forward to touch the feet of the Holy One. Intense longing and devotion shone from the faces of all—all except that of a tiny mite whose father held him head down to kiss the sacred feet. It was the darshan of a saint. They were gathering a tiny spark of the grace that he had accumulated during many myriad lives of goodness. Perhaps one day they might be as holy as he; in the meantime let them drink in the blessedness of touching such a one.

In the meantime, one of the ‘professors’ was trying to explain the Guru’s teaching. It was based upon ceaselessly calling upon the name of God, Hari Om. He asked me if I had any questions to ask, but I could only say that the crowd was so overwhelming I could not think of anything.

Eventually His Holiness rose to leave. The crowd was parted with difficulty for many tried to snatch the dust from his feet even as he was walking. We followed him out and were taken to the quiet bedroom and offered lunch, mostly of the uncooked salad variety which foreigners are warned to avoid on account of dysentery germs. I was asked if I would like to meet His Holiness in private. I said I would like to meet Govinda Das. When he came I asked him if after initiation by the guru one rises above anger and hatred. He said this was undoubtedly so, and that such feelings would never return. I then asked whether a guru was necessary for a spiritual aspirant. He replied that a guru was not essential but that progress was speedier if one had such. This is probably correct. The trouble is that it is not the individual who decides whether his progress is to be fast or slow or whether he is to find a guru or not find one.

And now, lo and behold, since I would not go to this particular guru, *he* came to *me*! Someone suggested afterwards that my very reluctance made him curious. But I am inclined to the view that he was genuinely anxious for my soul’s salvation. I asked him whether people who came for his darshan would go away reformed characters. I was told that this was assuredly the case and also that many would return to their homes to meditate for six hours on end as a result of the inspiration they had received. He called me his elder sister and said he had known me in a previous life. And when he gave his farewell blessing he embraced me in impersonal manner.

Once again I felt envy. These folk were secure and certain .They had someone on whom to lean. But I knew that not for me would there ever be the arms of any Mother Church and probably not the grace of any guru.

After the adventures in Calcutta, I set forth as a Buddhist pilgrim to the land the Buddha trod, but always on the look-out for that quiet ashram and teacher of meditation. I also met many disciples of various well known gurus. By and large they were not very good advertisements for their Teachers. Of course one should not judge another. ‘Measure not the measure of a man,’ said the Buddha, ‘he who measures the measure of a man digs a pit for himself.’ Perhaps the seed of spiritual growth was growing underneath, but outwardly there was not the absence of, say, anger, that the Calcutta guru had said was the inevitable result of initiation.

The Himalayan hill-town of Almora, something over 5,000 feet high, straddles the sharp crest of a mile-long ridge with valleys dropping away steeply in front and far more steeply behind. It hangs between two pine-clad hills and it looks forth to the white snows of the Thrones of the Gods. But more important still, it lies between two sacred pilgrim routes, one to the source of the Ganges River and the other to Mount Kailas in Tibet, the holiest mountain in the world and sacred alike to Hindus and Buddhists. The vibrations there were very good, I was told, and ashrams abounded. Moreover, Mayavaiti, where the Rama Krishna Mission had its meditation centre, was only fourteen miles away. There was a branch of the Mission in Almora, as there is in most important Indian towns, and I meekly suggested to the swami in charge that meditation at Mayavaiti would be good. I was again gently snubbed. It seemed that Mayavaiti was not for unaccompanied females even though their hair might be grey. Indeed, the impression left behind by these very kindly Rama Krishna monks was that they were acutely sex-conscious and genuinely afraid of women.

A friend and I next attended a puja at the ashram of Anandamaya on the edge of the wooded hill at the opposite end of Almora. The picture of Anandamaya occupied the central position and the puja was the worship of her as an incarnation of God. The worshippers were little boys who donned yellow shawls for the worship, round whose borders was the Sanskrit

word for ‘Mother’. The puja over, they became little white-robed Brahmacharis studying mundane and spiritual matters under a guru in the traditional Hindu manner. A Frenchman was studying at the ashram. He had taken a vow of silence and was meditating most of the time, but it was a boys’ school, not a meditation centre. No female except Anandamaya herself ever stayed there, and she came only occasionally.

The ideal place for a meditation ashram was a lonely temple jutting out into the steep blue-misted valley to the south that somehow seemed to recall pictures of the Grand Canyon of Arizona. It was built at the end of a kind of isthmus, and the narrow path from the town plunged down between stone walls and terraces nearly as deep as they were wide. It was presided over by a yellow-robed Brahmin. I removed my sandals at the foot of the steps leading up to his sanctum. Two women were attending upon His Reverence, and they welcomed me with smiles to the top of the steps. But at the top they gave me prasad, and indicated I must stop. No further might a Westerner go, for Westerners, like Indian untouchables, are outcastes. The saffron-robed One was reading a sacred book as he sat under a sacred bodhi or banyan tree, the same *ficus religiosa* under which the Buddha sat when he attained enlightenment. I thanked them with smiles, surveyed the scene, and then there was nothing for it but to smile my way down the steps again.

I was always meeting chelas and hearing of yogis, and gurus and ashrams. But I never saw that all-compelling yellow robe disappearing round the corner, nor felt the least inclination to drop the money and the bus-ticket and follow after. The result was that, instead of the quiet ashram and the guru, I found a lonely bungalow at Binsar, 8,000 feet high with a perennial darshan of the pure snows of Trisul, the trident of the God Shiva, the destroyer of the earthly that the Eternal may be found, and I lived there as hermit in the Himalayas, striving vainly to restore the tired body to health.

I left the Himalayas having learned many truths, but apparently without having benefited either physically or

mentally, and certainly without having become an adept at meditation.

Two interesting things happened during the second year after the return from India. The first was the restoration of perfect health, due, so far as could be seen, simply to accepting the body's pain and the office worries without resentment or ill-will. Perhaps learning hatha yoga exercises may also have helped, not from the spiritual angle, but simply because standing on the head and that kind of exercise, clears congestion which is a main cause of many physical troubles. The second was the beginning of a tiny group drawn chiefly from the Buddhist Society who came to my bushland cottage of 'Ahimsa' once a month, principally for meditation.

For those who like peace and solitude Sydney is wonderfully situated, for it is surrounded by barren sandstone country unattractive to the farmer, so that within fifteen miles of what is spoken of as 'the second city of the Empire', there are wild bushlands, or forested hills. In winter and spring they are sprinkled with wild flowers and the air is filled with bird-song. Probably our little group did not learn much about meditation, but the fellowship was good, and also good was the practice of sitting still and being forced for a little while to try and quieten the busy intellect.

As one of these gatherings was ending, a neighbour brought over a Burmese lady, Daw Toke Gale, studying welfare work in Sydney. The neighbour had been Secretary of a Y.M.C.A. in the East, and I naturally took it for granted that Daw Toke Gale was a Christian convert, and Christian converts are not as interesting as Buddhist ones! When it transpired she was not, I asked her about staying at the large meditation centre in Rangoon. Despite the cold shoulder that Burma had turned, there was still an inexplicable call to go there. She said she did not think the Rangoon Centre would suit me, but that if I came to her home town of Mandalay, she was sure she could find exactly the right one.

It seemed impossible again to forsake a steadily expanding lawyer's practice. However, the idea stuck, and soon after, I — started making inquiries about planes to Mandalay. And then trying to go seemed sillier than ever, and to make matters worse Daw Toke Gale's letters suddenly ceased and I got no replies to at least half-a-dozen that I wrote. But in other directions, one by one the doors opened. I did not know where I was going, but I booked a plane passage. It was only just before departure that at last a letter to a certain U Aye Bo, to whom I had written among many others whose names had been given, evoked a reply. And then at last a letter from Daw Toke Gale arrived, but it was too late to make any proper arrangements, and I drove to the airport with no clear idea of what would happen when the plane dropped down at Mandalay.

CHAPTER TWO

INTO THE SILENCE

Six times before I had left Australia, each time with high hopes for adventures among mountains or yogis. But now there was no expectation. It was simply a journey that Fate seemed to have decreed, and of what was in store there was no idea. Furthermore, there was nothing about the journey that reason could endorse. It was well known that in Burma the yellow-robed monks were kow-towed to with a reverence that a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church might envy. No one dared criticize them and all went down on their faces before them. This was wholly opposed to my, not merely protestant, but Unitarian-dissenting background, and still more to an innate Quakerism which insists that there is no such thing as a professional priest or religieux, and that only in so far as the individual can let the Inner Light of the Spirit shine through, can he be regarded as a spiritual leader or teacher. Contacts with yellow-robed ones up to date had not shown that they let the Light shine through them any more satisfactorily than ordinary people. ‘Why of all places should Burma have been chosen? I only knew that it was not I who had made the choice.

After nearly missing the plane at Bangkok, I was at length driving through the streets of Rangoon at dawn as the first worshippers were mounting the steps to the Sulay Pagoda and the sun was gilding the golden Shwe Dagon. I was back again in the heart of Burmese Buddhism with its gaiety and light and colour.

At the airport the announcer called for passengers ‘from’ Mandalay, instead of ‘to’ or ‘for’, and the use of the wrong preposition coupled with the departure of the plane twenty minutes ahead of schedule nearly caused another missed connection, but Fate had decreed that I should reach Mandalay at the appointed time.

We flew over forested mountain ranges whose serrated higher peaks floated upon fleecy clouds. They were said to be infested by bandits, but they lay very peacefully in the pastel blue of early morning and only an occasional moth-eaten patch showed that human beings dwelt among them. On the flat lands of the west the Irrawaddy River meandered into view from time to time. And then the plane dropped down over white pagoda spires with houses on stilts looking like grey crabs crawling over mud flats. At the first stopping place I knew I was going to like Burma. The air had the clean, cold tang of winter; white-robed Catholic fathers stooped with yellow-robed monks over the book of the same tally-clerk, and there was a funny little boy with a huge ball; he was the first of many Burmese with whom I was to fall in love. If no one met me at Mandalay I now knew I should be perfectly happy to go up to the first Burmese in European clothes and say, ‘Please, I have come all the way from Australia to spend a month in a meditation centre, what would you advise me to do about it?’ But what I did not then know was that Burmese in European dress, unlike Indians, do not necessarily speak English!

We flew over more forested hills with flame red trees crimsoning the slopes and then we dropped down over the white pagodas of Mandalay. It was drier here and there were no grey crabs crawling over mud flats. As the plane came to rest, three pairs of smiling eyes met mine. There was Daw Toke Gale, who had first made this journey possible by her ‘chance’ visit to ‘Ahimsa’ that Sunday afternoon; U Aye Bo, whose name had been sent to me by Sir Lalita Rajapakse a few weeks before flying; and a little bald-headed English-speaking nun in petal-pink robes, Sayalay Daw Saranawati. Daw Toke Gale, prospecting various meditation centres around Mandalay, had come to the Maha Bodhi Centre, and whom should she find there

but Daw Saranawati, formerly a college friend, who only a few months ago had decided to 'cut the cycle of birth and death' by becoming a nun. No one else at any of the centres spoke English, so the decision as to which centre it was to be was made before we left the air strip. And to make matters easier still, U Aye Bo's sister, Daw Ma Malay was one of the thirty Mandalay citizens who supported this centre.

Sayalay Saranawati (Sayalay is the title of a nun of ordinary standing, as distinct from Sayagyi, one of long standing) was to be my devoted companion over the weeks that followed, and I have never before lived with anyone so filled with loving-kindness and so completely sell-effacing. She came from the hill town of Maymyo, which is over 3,000 feet high, and had been to a Christian school where English was the medium of tuition. Unlike other Burmese women, she had never had her ears pierced for earrings, the ceremony that for girls takes place at the same time as their little brothers don the yellow robes to become monks for a short period. People used to think she must have become a nun when a child. Perhaps her subconscious mind knew that she would become a nun in middle life, but all she knew consciously was that she was afraid of the pain and ran away and hid. All other nuns I saw had large holes where the earrings had been. She had eleven brothers and sisters, and her father died when six of them were still at school and herself just starting her University course. Sarana swallowed her disappointment and took a position with the telephone exchange so as to contribute to her family's support. She was there 16 years; that was why her English was so fluent. By and large Burmese people, even those educated in English-teaching schools, do not speak English as fluently as Indians, for they never speak it among themselves. Sarana's last position had been teacher of Burmese at a convent school, where she and her sister were the only non-Catholics.

Her awakening to the deeper meaning of life was no sudden change. After her thirtieth year she had gradually lost interest in such things as music, shows, personal adornment. Then on April 22, 1953, when she was forty-one years old, the idea came that this was not enough; she must leave the world altogether. For ten

days she went without the evening meal, and found no difficulty. What she found far more difficult after she became a nun was learning how to sit on the floor, and for many months she evinced an indecorous eagerness to find a chair whenever there was one to be found. But six months later when I knew her, stiff limbs had become supple and there was no longer difficulty.

'To cut the cycle of birth, death and rebirth and find liberation and bliss—for herself !' She admitted that it was for her own benefit that she had left the world, whereas Dr Soni, the Indian, was working for everyone. This idea of seeking sell-salvation is one of the hardest things about Southern Buddhism for the outsider to grasp and justify. But when you meet Burmese people, at least lay people and nuns, you wonder whether they are not maligning themselves, for the merit of every meritorious act they do, including that of meditation, is promptly distributed among all sentient beings. They may say they are bent on sell-salvation, but are they? Consistency is a dubious virtue, and the fact remains that I have never lived among people so completely devoid of all selfishness and thought of self.

As we were leaving the airstrip Dr Soni, the Indian mentioned, came to greet me, so in all four people had come to welcome a complete stranger to their land. Dr Soni had taken upon himself the task of striving to spread the teaching of the Buddha both in Burma and in India. Unlike most Burmese, he was a strict vegetarian, but he was not a meditator as such. (But, of course, almost all Indians usually meditate to some extent.) His work was through speech, not through silence.

Although the meditation centre had been chosen, Sarana and I were to spend one day at U Aye Bo's house in the heart of the town. He had a large suite of rooms especially for guests and an elaborate glass-encased Buddha shrine with a gold image set with semi-precious stones. All Burmese Buddhists have shrines in their houses just as all Catholics have crucifixes; some are very beautiful and ornate, while others may have only a tiny image, a glass of pure water and a few flowers. They 'say their prayers' before these shrines every morning as they have been

taught to do since infancy. Buddhist scholars shudder at such a shocking expression—'say their prayers, indeed! The Buddha is no god to whom to pray!' None the less I merely repeat what I heard said over and over again by educated Buddhists familiar with the English language. These so-called prayers consist of the repetition of the Three Refuges—'I go to the Buddha for refuge. I go to the Dhamma for refuge. I go to the Sangha for refuge.' They follow by taking the precepts—five or eight or even nine—Non-killing, not taking what is not given, truthfulness, not indulging in intoxicants, not indulging in wrongful sexual passion, not eating after noon, avoidance of shows, dancing and music, of high and luxurious beds, of perfumes, cosmetics and garlands. Lay people take the last ones only on special occasions. U Aye Bo had exceptionally high and luxurious beds for his guests. Before Sarana went to sleep she had to remind herself she was not on this bed for pleasure but only because of necessity. The next 'prayer' is the suffusing of all things with rays of boundless love. Then they may pay respect to the Buddha and repeat his nine qualities, and the six of the Sangha. Finally they distribute the merit of all their good deeds—including these 'prayers' among all sentient beings. Perhaps these 'prayers' would be better called mantras. But whatever they are called, they are repeated as often as any other sacred phrases in the world.

We had lunch with U Aye Bo. We had to hurry to his home to be there before noon, or Sarana could not have eaten that day. We had the evening meal with Dr Soni, and Sarana could not eat that, and as I had been practising going without the evening meal for six months previously, I felt no urge to do so either. Dr Soni and I found we had a great deal in common besides the same books which stood on our respective bookshelves. Talking with him was almost too stimulating for a prospective meditator.

The following day we ended 'life in the world' by visiting Daw Toke Gale's home, which bore the imprint of people who had come under the influence of the European. There were dogs that were loved as much as our own, as well as orthodox tables and chairs and even Nescafé. But there was also a shrine to the Nats, or nature spirits.

Then we drove to the Meditation Centre. There was still no thrill of expectation, and no idea of what it would bring. It was merely an important item on the programme.

The Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre is surrounded by a high wall, each section of which bears the name of the person who provided the funds to build it, as also does each meditation hut. Of course, the donor distributed the merit of the gift as soon as he made it. Perhaps the European may suspect that the donor likes a little honour and glory for himself even though he may have distributed the merit. Perhaps, too, the European who finds it hard work to collect funds for worthy causes may think this display of the donors' names might be a good way of encouraging others to do likewise. Whatever way you look at it, there would seem to be much to be said for letting the world know who gave which, instead of merely putting it in the annual report and thence into the waste-paper basket!

Above the name of the centre at the main gate was a symbol which signifies the Three Limbs of the Perfected Life—Sila (morality or virtue), Samadhi (mindfulness, meditation and concentration), and Panna (supreme wisdom). Beyond the gate is an ornamental pool with large fishes and larger tortoises which come out on to the stone bank to sun themselves. It was once a prince's pleasure garden and the children still like to come and feed the fishes on Sunday afternoon with little regard for the notice near the lake bearing the rules of the Centre. U Aye Bo had interpreted them for me the day before when we visited the Centre to make arrangements. They struck me as being extraordinarily sensible, the sort of rules I should have made myself.

The dominant one was 'Teo Teo' which I pronounced to myself as 'Daw Daw'—'Shut Shut', or 'speak very little, speak very quietly', 'Hush! Hush!' The Burmese letters for it which appear on the dust cover are something like two question marks turned the wrong way. They stared at you from every convenient panel, post and tree. When you saw them on a gate as you were

motoring along the road, you knew at once that inside the gate was a meditation centre.

The other rules were then as follows (they were considerably added to before the next visit):

'Be still and keep apart from your friends.

Do not sleep during meditation periods.

Follow the Instructor and have faith in his instruction.

As long as you are following his method, do not go to another Instructor.

Do not let what you have read come into your mind.

Keep your mind on the present, not on the past or the future.

Keep to the one method of meditation. Do not change the method.

Do not let sloth overcome you.

Whether meditating or not, strive to gather in diffuseness of thought.

You may lie, sit, stand or walk while meditating.

Always keep in mind that of the Noble Eightfold Path, the first five steps remain very important, even though here you may be primarily bent upon the last three—effort, mindfulness and meditation.

If you work with patience you will attain.'

Beside the notice board was the daily time table, and that, too, seemed to be very sensible, indicating a regime the middle way between asceticism and luxury.

The day before I had also been introduced to the Instructor, Saya U Thein. He was a layman, not a monk, and this was even better than the Rules and the Time Table. It fitted in perfectly with that innate Quakerism. He had asked various questions concerning my history and background. He seemed remote and

distant. I neither liked nor disliked him. I was still prejudiced against gurus, but I was here to receive what should be given.

U Aye Bo left Sarana and me at the Centre and drove away. The world was left behind and I was here for at least a month, morally bound not to leave without the approval of the Instructor and not to ask to leave for at any rate several days, even to visit the bank or post office. I chose a meditation hut, the furthest away from the dining shed and the Dhamma Hall which formed the centre of the little community. It had a 'Daw Daw' notice on the tree opposite and some curious birds' nests like half-filled Christmas stockings hanging from a tree above. It was built over the moat and reached by a wooden bridge.

That evening Sarana and I went to 'pay respect' to the Buddha statue in the Dhamma Hall and to the Instructor, U Thein, by going down with our faces on our hands on the floor. The paying respect repeated three times is very good for keeping the schoolgirl figure. This was only my second attempt and it was most ungainly.

Without further ado, the Instructor commenced the instruction and followed with the initiation ritual. I was to gain concentration by watching the mind and the feeling of the breath coming in and out of the nostrils, anapana, as it is called, but a far simpler type than the usual variations described in the text books. U Thein considered it a waste of energy to watch the path of the breath down to the navel and up again, or to watch the movement of the abdomen. If you are sawing a log of wood you keep your eye on the spot where the teeth of the saw are actually cutting the wood. He explained that the object of the work was to attain Nirvana and nothing else. I protested that I did not want to find Nirvana for myself but for all beings, and that in any case there was no individual self to find it, for all was Anatta. Sarana duly translated and he appeared to be pleased at my protest and concurred; it had been only ulterior motives of pleasure and power that he ruled out. He then said one might meditate sitting, standing, walking or lying. When he saw I could sit in the lotus posture with feet upturned on the thighs, he gave his approval. Unlike Indians, Burmese do not adopt this posture for

meditation. The men sit merely cross-legged and the women with both feet to the side, which may account for the fact that many meditators have a slight stoop. Doubtless folk in Mandalay will now be certain that all Europeans delight in the lotus posture and it will never enter anyone's head that the next European at the Centre might prefer a chair!

Sarana gave a brief outline of the ceremony that was to follow. It commenced with the Three Refuges—the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha—and included the Precepts already mentioned and added a final one of boundless love. I was asked to show I endorsed the ritual by joining in as best I could, saying 'La! La!' or something similar, and I did my best to co-operate as devoutly as was possible. I was intrigued by one word which was repeated at frequent intervals. To my unphonetic ear it sounded like 'Bandy'; it turned out to be Bhante, or Lord, which I should have guessed.

The taking of the Three Refuges and the frequent invocation of the Lord are more important than Westerners generally allow. So much emphasis was placed by the Buddha on the fact that everything depends upon ourselves and our own efforts that we often overlook his insistence, especially to Ananda before his death, that we must take refuge in the Dhamma, the Law or the Truth, and in the Self, the Deathless Essence, or Lamp within. When people turn from Christianity they discard the refuge of Christ and the priesthood and feel little inclined to substitute the Buddha and the Sangha. Though they may take the Refuges as a formality, they mean little or nothing to them. But in throwing out the husks, they have thrown out the kernels also. Names do not matter, but the psychological attitude of relaxing and trusting in a Power not oneself, matters very much indeed. It is not the doctor or the splint that heals the broken bone; these things merely provide suitable conditions for healing. Similarly, it is not meditation which heals the dislocated mind; meditation merely provides the right conditions. In each case the actual healing is accomplished by that Power not ourselves, call it what we will. Sell-effort and taking refuge in another Power are opposite sides of the same coin. The one is useless without the other.

The precepts have already been mentioned. The major ones are non-killing, in the wide sense of ahimsa or harmlessness, non-lying, non-stealing, or not taking what is not given, chastity and avoidance of intoxicants. And the minor ones, not eating after noon, avoidance of shows, dancing and music, personal adornment and unnecessary cosmetics, and high and luxurious beds. The monks add a final one about not handling gold and silver. We took all the precepts except the last.

How far are these precepts necessary to success in meditation and how far are these necessary if this concentration of thought is to be beneficial and not harmful to the meditator or others?

In Burma they were considered essential. And taken in the spirit if not exactly the letter, no Eastern system differs substantially, provided we take celibacy to mean strict control of the sexual urge. But when we turn to the West we find amazing differences even in the five chief precepts.

Catholicism speaks with the same voice in the matter of celibacy and control of sex-desire, but it has never asserted the basic need of truthfulness and it has never advocated non-killing as necessary for achieving sainthood. Quakers emphatically assert the need for truthfulness and they advocate non- killing, but not because oneness with all beings can be achieved only if there is reverence for all life, and the Quaker Book of Discipline has no word about non-killing as applied to the lower orders. On the matter of celibacy or strict control of the sexual desire, again the Quaker Book of Discipline is silent. Finally, few Western religious sects of importance have seen the need for total abstinence from intoxicants for spiritual development. Whether these failures of Western mystics to speak with the same voice as their Eastern brothers has anything to do with the sorry pages of Christian history, each may decide for himself. Of course, there are also sorry pages in Eastern religious history, but of a different kind.

So much for the five major precepts. The lesser ones are far more important than appears at first glance. They are designed to aid restraint of the five senses by removing temptation.

No food is to be taken after noon. The Vinaya rules for monks speak of one meal a day, but this is interpreted as one main meal a day. There is nothing magical about the hour of noon. Before I left I told U Thein I should probably not revert to an evening meal, but that the midday meal would be at 1 p.m. and that I should probably have a cup of hot milk in the evening. He saw no objection to this; reduction of the intake of food was all that was required, and one would think this to be a rule of simple good health for all over the age of thirty unless engaged in manual labour. But what does seem strange to one who has studied Eastern philosophy is that in Burma meat-eating is not taboo to the meditator, as it is in Patanjali's 'Yoga Aphorisms' and generally in Indian philosophy. In Burma the people are inveterate meat-eaters and do not relinquish meat-eating when they meditate. As long as someone else commits the crime of doing the killing they see no inconsistency with Ahimsa, or non-killing. Certainly meat-eating would seem to be no hindrance to meditation; if there are objections to a carnivorous diet they must be found elsewhere.

High and luxurious beds are probably ruled out because they conduce to over-indulgence in sleep. The proscription of music dancing, shows, cosmetics, perfumes, garlands and personal adornment, is perhaps the most interesting and certainly the most controversial, because all these things are on occasion used in religious rites. But if such things are avoided then obviously a temptation is removed from the visual, aural and nasal sense organs. With the growth of spiritual life and the practice of meditation, attachment to these things falls away naturally. But as Elizabeth Fry, the Quaker prison reformer, found with her children and as the stories of the Vinaya rules for monks testify it is a mistake to try and force abstinence before the time is ripe. It is equally a mistake to imagine that it is possible to retain attachment to these things, no, not even to music, and expect growth in spiritual life, still less progress in meditation. Except during periods of intensive meditation, there would seem no reason for discarding these things completely, and in the early stages of spiritual life they may well be an aid. The danger is that the aspirant may remain attached and his progress thereby

retarded unless he keeps ceaselessly before him the need for outgrowing them.

With regard to the sixth sense, the intellect and those thoughts which are forever preventing the natural psychic growth, the precepts have nothing to say, probably because there were no books, let alone newspapers or magazines, in primitive Buddhism. At the Centre the temptation was as far as possible removed because no books, magazines or newspapers were available and we were asked not to read. Like the intake of food, the intake of intellectual distractions must be reduced. It is not necessary or desirable that no books should be read—except during periods of intensive meditation—but it will be found that attachment to reading will gradually fall away exactly like attachment to music, dancing and shows. In neither case does this mean that pleasure is no longer found in such things—indeed the pleasure can become far greater—but simply that one does not mind whether one has them or does not have them.

So much for the precepts. After the ceremony was over, someone offered me a cup of coffee. After all, it was the first night. But coffee contains milk, which was accounted a food. I dutifully refused. I was not going to start by breaking one of the precepts, even though personally I could see no harm in it. Whether it was because of this or not, I do not know, but it was not a comfortable night and meditation was not very successful until after rice-gruel at 6 a.m. the following morning.

On the second evening Dr Soni very kindly came to interpret. Of course he spoke perfect English and theoretically would have been the better interpreter, but I realized afterwards that the real reason for asking him was not this, but the fact that he was a man and Sarana a mere woman. In point of fact Sarana was far the better of the two on account of her Christian school background, which enabled her to catch the meaning rather than the words, and also because she was practising the same meditational method. But even with her help, there was a certain amount of misunderstanding from the outset. I have often wondered whether a common language might have enabled U Thein to

have been more helpful during those first days, for he had certainly no clairvoyant insight, and there seemed somehow to be no contact.

About the third evening there was another interview with him and in response to his questions I dutifully told him of an interesting vision that had come on the very first day. He appeared to listen nonchalantly, and it was not until just before I left that I heard the vision had been one of good omen. For the rest he left me completely in the dark; he said nothing either to encourage or discourage, and certainly nothing to inspire confidence. It is not considered wise to give any indications to aspirants as to what they may expect or as to the meaning of what may be happening. Their work is simply to meditate and leave the rest to the Dhamma, the very nature of things as they are and the law of their being.

These visions or phenomena, as I have heard them called, nearly always come to meditators in the early stages—I could remember having them when I first practised meditation fourteen or fifteen years previously. At Maha Bodhi I saw them as if a very fast-moving cinematograph film slowed down and suddenly stood still. They show that a reasonable degree of concentration has been obtained, but in themselves they are not important. They should never be told to a non-meditator, and unless practising under an experienced teacher they should be looked at and then dismissed from attention at once. Under the experienced teacher you are soon warned to disregard them. They have no reality and if looked at too long they will turn the meditator aside from the straight path and in certain cases may have serious consequences. The nature of visions is discussed more fully in the last chapter.

Not knowing that the vision was of good omen, I was genuinely distressed by the fact that the excitement of new surroundings and new and interesting things was preventing concentration to the extent I had grown accustomed to at home when for brief periods the curtain of thought would, as it were part and reveal the clear Light of the Void. It was said we could change our position when meditating so long as we were mindful

when doing so, and that we could change from sitting to lying or to walking or standing. Sometimes, therefore, during the long five-hour period after noon, I would leave the hut and walk mindfully round the lake, or stand looking at the tortoises sunning themselves on the stone wall, or at the changing reflections on the water of the fretwork roof of the phongyi khaung, the building for monks. Had the Dhamma brought me to yet another strange land only to prove once again that, as Gandhi said, there is no guru but God? I would then return to the little hut only to find the brain as bright and lively as ever, jumping about like a monkey, instead of lying quiet as it had been trained to do, so that a deeper wisdom might come to life.

It was not until the fifth day that the brain began to quieten down, and it is very significant that this was when the method of watching the breath coming in and out of the nostrils had developed one step and become a pin-point of breathing where life forever comes and goes, creation and destruction, ceaselessly coming into existence and passing out of existence. I did not realize that this was the theme soon to be given by the Instructor. For the moment all I knew was that the poor brain had at last got hold of something that was interesting and was therefore content to lie still and watch.

U Thein gave no warning about visions because it is not thought advisable to put suggestions into the yogi's (meditator's) head, lest it be his imagination and not the Dhamma that brings the visions into being. For the same reason he did not warn about physical upsets that usually come between the first and the ninth day after intensive meditation is commenced. Sarana had 'furnished' my hut with a brick on which to stand the candle, a bamboo mat on which to lie, a chamber-pot and a spittoon, and murmured something about vomiting. The spittoon seemed a strange item of furniture, but I gave it no further thought, for though people may occasionally vomit, the danger of so doing is not as a rule considered imminent enough to require any precaution to be taken—except on board ship! I later found out that some meditators do indeed vomit and even suffer from such things as dysentery. Neither of these complaints came to me, but I did get genuinely alarmed when on the second day the body

developed most uncomfortable abdominal pains coupled with an unpleasant looseness of the bowels. Of course, I never dreamed of mentioning these things to U Thein—no modest lady likes to talk about her internal complaints to a strange gentleman. I wondered if I had eaten uncooked vegetables or drunk unboiled water and contracted some terrible tropical disease. I tried doubling the daily dozen yoga exercises, massaging the stomach, all without avail. Fortunately, on the third day I told Sarana. She smiled with joy. 'Good! Good! The change is taking place already. You must have a good karma.'

Whatever be the explanation of these physical disturbances, they appear to be the usual thing. I have talked with others who have practised meditation in Burma and they all experienced something of the kind. One was of opinion that even instructors did not realize they were purely psychic in their origin and merely talked of 'Dukkha' (pain) and the need to accept it. But U Thein knew very well about the cause, and could judge the meditator's progress by it. Easterners are far more open in discussing their internal intimate complaints than we are. He once told us jubilantly that one of the monks had eight bowel movements on the second day!

Avery few people do not suffer at all, and although the pains indicate progress, they do not show how soon or late liberation will be found, for the first may be last and the last first. Whatever the type of suffering, the only thing to do is to bear it, and accept it as part of the dukkha that is inherent in all creation. It is a waste of energy to go to doctors or take medicine, however alarming the symptoms, for neither doctors nor medicine will end it so long as the practice of meditation continues. When the time is ripe the pain will disappear and health will be found to have immeasurably improved.

There were two little incidents during those first two days that left a deep impression. The first was the visit of U Sein Maung, a wealthy merchant in juggery, a sugary substance made from toddy palms, with his wife and partner, and his daughter, Minnie, who was attending a convent school where the tuition was in

English, so that later on she would be able to travel abroad for her parents and conduct their business for them. At present she was far too shy to act as her father's interpreter, but she had sufficient foresight to ask for my card! The family had come on the Sabbath (the quarter day of the moon) to spend the afternoon in meditation at the Centre which they helped to support. U Sein Maung (through some other interpreter than his daughter) told me he wished to acquire merit by putting his new car at my disposal after the month's meditation was over, so that I could go to the Sagaing Hills and visit other meditation centres.

The other incident happened when I was drinking lime juice and glucose after 5 p.m.—for some reason or other these things were not classed as 'food', and U Aye Bo insisted on providing them for me, and I was glad to accept. I was talking with Sarana when a man for whom I felt a strange affinity quietly entered and sat down beside me on the floor. After looking at me intently for a minute or two, he spoke to Sarana and she translated. 'He says you have known each other in a previous life.' I clasped my hands to show there was mutual understanding and he nodded assent.

Talking with interesting English-speaking strangers who came at 5 p.m. or even with Sarana, I soon realized was the most serious of distractions and I voluntarily decided to take a vow of silence for at least a fortnight, so that none of them could be offended. But U Aye Bo was exempted from this vow. He used to come about every other day, generally bringing some type of European food, which was a pure luxury. We would talk quietly about the Dhamma and meditation and sometimes about the state of morality in the business and political world. This was perhaps not quite in accord with the rules of the Centre, but I did not feel it was against the spirit of them, for these little talks had a quieting, not a stimulating, effect, although he was fifteen years my junior and very much living 'in the world'. 'Aye Bo' means the 'cool boy'. He did not feel he had progressed very far towards the coolness of Nirvana, but perhaps he carried the potentiality of it with him so that he was not distracting like other English-speaking visitors. His mother was a large merchant principally in tea—most of the leading merchants in Mandalay

appeared to be women. His daughter and niece were now helping her. He was deeply devoted to her and the oncoming weakness of her old age affected him very much. After my return to Australia, on her eightieth birthday, she handed over her business concerns to the two girls, and soon after she died. A thousand people attended her funeral and about £E.800 was spent in making donations of ten kyats to one hundred monks, five kyats to one hundred nuns and providing a concrete slab for her grave, in accordance with her dying instructions.

U Aye Bo himself managed his brother's branch business and he was training his nephew, Reggie, whose photo in academic robes adorned the walls of the guest room in U Aye Bo's house. U Aye Bo did not blind himself with specious arguments to the fact that his way of life was not in accord with the teaching of his Master. He was genuinely distressed when he allowed his employees to do things that were untruthful while he was ostensibly unaware of what was going on. He did not pretend that meat-eating was ahimsa merely because he himself had not done the killing. Kitchens with 'dead carcases' in them were a misery to him, but his body craved meat and he could abstain only during Lent. After I returned I sent him a book about Quaker business people and their ability to speak the truth, even in a ruthless business world. He said it helped him a great deal and it may have led to the decision he made later to change his business.

Daw Toke Gale, U Aye Bo and Sayalay Daw Saranawati—I have often loved people with dark skins, but never before had I been with those I felt to be my brothers and sisters. Daw Nyunt and U Thein the Instructor, were shortly to be added to the list, and it is to these five that this book is dedicated. Whatever the spiritual, mental and physical discomforts of those first days, the dominant impression was one of extraordinary kindness. I had never before been in such surroundings of boundless love and blissful peace. The very garden seemed to lie in an atmosphere of love, serenity and self-giving.

CHAPTER THREE

THE VIPASSANA MEDITATION CENTRE

There were very few people at the Centre during December and January, because, said Sarana, 'Burmese people are afraid of the cold.' However, there soon arrived two women, a girl of about twelve and a boy rather younger. The children went to an English Christian school, and what better way of spending the Christmas vacation than at a Buddhist Meditation Centre! On the fifth day after my own arrival and the third after theirs, the Instructor sent word that on the following day (which happened to be Christmas Eve) they and I would receive the second initiation in the Dhamma Hall or Temple, followed by four hours' meditation in his presence, the first hour of which would be standing. My unfortunate body has never been happy when standing, and when I told U Aye Bo this he said it was not essential.

At 1 p.m. on Christmas Eve, Sarana and I went to the Dhamma Hall. U Thein placed a white scarf over my shoulders, saying that I was now a Yogi and should always wear the scarf when meditating. The men, or I should say the males, for among them was the little boy, sat on the floor in front and the women behind. There were several experienced meditators to assist the Instructor, while a cousin of Sarana, an officer in the Post Office, I think, came especially to gain merit by acting as Interpreter. He began a dissertation on Nama-Rupa (name and form), but as I am rather good at delivering Buddhist sermons myself, I am afraid I brought it to a premature termination and was not nearly as grateful as I should have been to the man who was usurping Sarana's place.

The ceremony seemed longer than the first and, of course, I understood nothing except an occasional important phrase specially translated. I did, however, understand 'Bhante' this

time and murmured devoutly whenever I heard it. The ceremony was later translated in summary by a visiting judge, and a full translation appears in the appendix.

Then followed a short sermon on the technique we were to adopt. It sounded rather like 'Pee-pay' or when said very quickly like 'Peepy Peepy'. The word was actually 'Phyit-pyet', literally 'In-out', creation and destruction, or coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be. We were to start by applying this conception of ceaseless creation and destruction at the tip of the nose, extending it to the top of the head and thence all through the body until we became conscious of the body and mind as consisting entirely of particles in creation and destruction, which is precisely what modern science by other means has shown to be the constitution, not merely of our bodies, but of the whole universe, to the furthest nebulae. We were to bring within this conception everything connected with body and mind, that is the six senses and the sense objects.

A curtain was then drawn between the males and females and the long meditation commenced, to begin with the Instructor stimulating our efforts with the repetition of 'Phyit-pyet' as he walked up and down, while Sarana ran her fingers up and down my body and said 'Change—change—change'.

Cushions were provided so that we could alter our position from sitting to lying. In the process of so changing, I got my feet somehow pointing towards the Buddha Statue (behind the curtain!). Sarana hastily righted them—it is shockingly irreverent to stick out one's foot towards anyone, let alone the Buddha! Once the postal official put his head over the curtain to say, 'Remember the boundless refuge of the Buddhas; do not worry about the result.' Another time he put his head over again—or at least I suppose he did, my eyes were dutifully closed—to ask whether I was feeling anything. 'Any tickling—no, I must not say more—er—er—anything . . .'I was sorry I could not oblige by feeling anything at all except a blessed relief that all within the body and mind were ceaselessly changing. I had never realized before the blessedness of ceaseless creation and destruction—ideas always coming-to-be, ceasing-to-be—body's troubles, coming, going—how wonderful that things never

stayed the same. The mind was marvelously at peace and there was not the slightest difficulty in concentrating.

The experienced meditators present helped us in a manner which has to be experienced to be understood. They were there to give us a stimulant to start us off as well as to help in case anyone did ‘feel anything’ such as, say, convulsions a little too strongly. But none of this little group showed anything except perfect peace. At 4 p.m. they left soundlessly. One could feel them leaving for a strength was withdrawn, but concentration continued without effort for another hour, when the ceremony was ended by distributing the merit of our work among all sentient beings.

There are three things about this initiation ceremony which appear to me very important but which I have not found stressed, and generally not even mentioned, in the text books. The first is the emphasis placed on taking refuge and dependence on a Power not ourselves. No Christian invoking God or Christ could more wholly yield to Something-Not-Self. This yielding trust avoids tenseness and strain, which prevent success and may even lead to neurosis and insanity. The second is that of extending love and forgiveness to all who have injured us and in return humbly asking the love and forgiveness of all whom we have injured. We bowed with our faces on the floor. Meditation or concentration of thought generates powerful forces and without that radiation of love, it might very well be turned to evil ends. It is said that Zen meditation was turned to military purposes in Japan. Whether it was or was not, it easily could be so turned unless accompanied by conscious loving-kindness to all, including enemies. The third thing that impressed me was the distribution of the merit among all, again another safeguard against the use of meditation for selfish or ulterior purposes.

At the interview with U Thein on the evening after the ceremony, he said that real work now commenced. The first exercise of anapana, looking at the breath, aimed only at gaining concentration, or samadhi. The Vipassana practise now started consisted of looking at the ceaselessly changing elements, in-out, phyit-pyet, creation and destruction taking place in every part of

the body and mind which could never be separated. The object of Vipassana meditation was to find out in actual experience that Dukkha (pain), Anicca (transience) and Anatta (selflessness) are inherent in everything, the very nature of things as they are, and through this to find Nirvana, the going-out of the things of earth and the coming to be of Amata, the Deathless. In the end, through the practise of Vipassana meditation, we would find that 'I am not a man; you are not a woman; she is not a nun'; for all consist simply of these same ceaselessly changing elements.

No more notice was to be taken of visions, for they are not real, and the only thing he now wished to hear of were bodily reactions which took place—I thought to myself that I had already had more than enough of bodily reactions, but I still did not dream of mentioning them, and they were not in fact discussed until a day or so before I left. It was Christmas Eve. I pointed out that Christmas Day was the symbol of the birth of new life. He agreed and added that Burma was a land of good omen. I asked if three more weeks would be long enough to complete the training. He replied that he did not know; all; depended upon karma and work in past lives. I liked him well enough, but there was still no real confidence. He was a teacher, but so, too, was the man who had written me an unkind letter just prior to departure and in so doing had helped to deflate the ego, and so, too, are all things that happen to us, both pleasant and unpleasant.

Christmas Day, the seventh after arrival, was one of great peace. The abdominal pains had departed. Body and mind were merged together in creation's waves of ceaseless coming-to-be and ceaseless ceasing-to-be and thought stood still for long periods at a tune. There was slight warmth, itching and heart-palpitation— but hardly enough to notice in the bliss of those peaceful waves coming and going. There rose to mind the memory of the lesson learned from four pine trees on Norfolk Island, that tiny speck of land in the Pacific where turquoise seas break in white waves on black basalt cliffs capped by creamy limestone, and crowned with those stately pines which are peculiar to this little island. Above my lonely tent there were four of these trees. The first was in childhood; its symmetrical

stars rose perfectly one above the other, topped with a little cross; I worshipped its perfection. The second was in youth; its stars, although not perfect, were very beautiful and also brought great joy. The third was in middle age; its stars had gone; it was little different from other—pine trees. The fourth was dying and only a few green needles grew among the dead branches. Across the gully was the standing trunk of a tree that was dead. It was terribly hard to accept the fact that there was no more significance in that exquisitely perfect young tree than in the one that was dying or the one that was dead, that life is a ceaselessly changing drama of birth, growth, death and rebirth, creation and destruction, change and decay, that my own body and mind were passing down to decay, and that not in anything of this transient world would there be found an ending of suffering.

After many years the lesson had been learned, and now there was only joy in being one with those waves of creation and destruction.

On the next day, almost before sitting down to meditate, and while there were still intruding thoughts, there developed a violent heart-palpitation and breathlessness as if climbing a terribly steep mountain at a high altitude and at too fast a pace.

Breaths had to be drawn deeper and deeper and quicker and quicker to keep up the pace, as it were, in the rarified air (though I have never in fact suffered such bad breathlessness in physical high altitudes). Finally I lay down. The breaths got not merely deeper but also slower and easier as they do when one's pace gets into rhythm on a mountain-climb. The chattering thoughts slowly departed, and there was complete relaxation and calm. After lunch the same delicious relaxation came almost at once, coupled with complete stillness, perfect rest without sleep, as if lying lulled on gentle waves of the ocean of all being. I almost wept with the beauty and bliss of it, and it was two and a half hours before the bliss faded, after which concentration was not very good. During those two and a half hours there had once or twice been the faintest pain near the heart but not enough to disturb the peace.

When told about floating on waves of coming and going U Thein first smiled approval, but then hastily checked himself

saying that success was more dangerous than failure and that if dwelt upon it would become a distraction preventing progress. I am satisfied he was right. True Samadhi, says Vinoba, Gandhi's spiritual successor, is not merely stillness of mind, but a perennial state of perfect equanimity consequent on dwelling simultaneously both in this world and in what is Beyond, the state of equanimity known to Brother Lawrence as Practice of the Presence of God. Some weeks later when visiting other meditation centres, I became irritated over some trifle and realized just how little this and other experiences of Samadhi had meant.

U Thein then went on to say that the method had still not been rightly grasped. The in-out, Phyit-pyet, had to be urged to speed. The nature-of-things-as-they-are is not that of gently undulating waves coming and going, but that of atoms changing very very quickly. That is what science also says, the dance of atoms, waves, corpuscles or wavacles, or whatever term you use, is fast, not slow. (And this is what in fact is found in meditation when the Dhamma, the Law of Being, takes possession. There is speed so intense that it cannot be grasped.)

Next day, obedient to U Thein's instructions, I practised Phyit-pyet quickly, faster than the speed of light from the top of the head to the soles of the feet and up again. There were three long periods of complete concentration that day, one and a half hours, two and a half and again one and a half. In the midst of the ceaseless change of the elements in the body there developed a whirling swirl of vapour which seemed to be like the thoughts moving quicker than the body's elements. Again it was bliss to be completely relaxed because in harmony with all creation, striving for nothing and desiring nothing. Later the whirling mass became shot through with crimson sparks, but the peace and concentration continued.

On the tenth day the experiences that I think had been due to the stimulating effect of having meditated with trained meditators in the Dhamma Hall, began to wear off, and a feeling of uneasiness crept in. As has been said, there had never been complete confidence between U Thein and me. On this day a trifling incident brought this to the surface. I found that the

obligation to tell him everything that was happening was dimming the Inner Light. I realized with dismay that these evening conferences would have to stop. I felt miserably ungrateful to my very kind friends. But there it was. When U Aye Bo called that evening and I told him, he said that of course I could go on staying at the Centre without needing to confer with U Thein, but that made me seem more ungrateful than ever. We went to the Dhamma Hall to see him and in the midst of a number of visitors I tried to explain. It was difficult enough to explain the situation to myself in the English language, but when it had to go through an interpreter, it seemed impossible. The Instructor handed U Ave Bo some 'temperature charts' he called them, on which he recorded in the form of a graph the progress the meditators were making. The first one recalled a lady who got pains in her ears, I remember. They were very interesting but not convincing. Finally, he said that if I would go to Daw Nyunt's cottage, he would come over later and see what could be done to right matters.

Daw Nyunt was the temporal head of the Centre, and along with U Aye Bo's sister, one of the two founders. She was completely selfless and brimming over with love and kindness. When I remarked to Sarana how wonderfully kind she had been to me, the reply was, 'It is not merely to you, but to everyone.'

She came from a lime-merchant's family—mother, father and four daughters. (It seemed strange to see firms called 'Daw—"such-and-such" and daughter', but that is the usual thing in Mandalay.) Probably a majority of the merchants are women; the men seem to prefer government jobs. I did not realize until the second visit to Mandalay that her father had also been in the business. She was the eldest, and when she left school at the age of twelve she became lime-saleswoman for the firm. Her education had taught her the Three Rs, Buddhist scriptures specially selected for school use, from the legends of the Buddha's previous lives, the history and geography of Burma; that was all. She liked her new work of selling lime. As her mother became a semi-invalid, more and more work fell upon her shoulders and she came under the influence of an aunt whom she grew to love deeply. When she was twenty-eight, the aunt

had an operation and died, and Daw Nyunt was terribly upset. She could think of nothing else. U Aye Bo's sister who was practising meditation under U Thein at the meditation centre near St John's leper hospital, suggested she should try and ease her misery by learning to meditate. She accepted the suggestion and left the business to her sisters. Very soon her misery left her and likewise her interest in the business of lime-merchant.

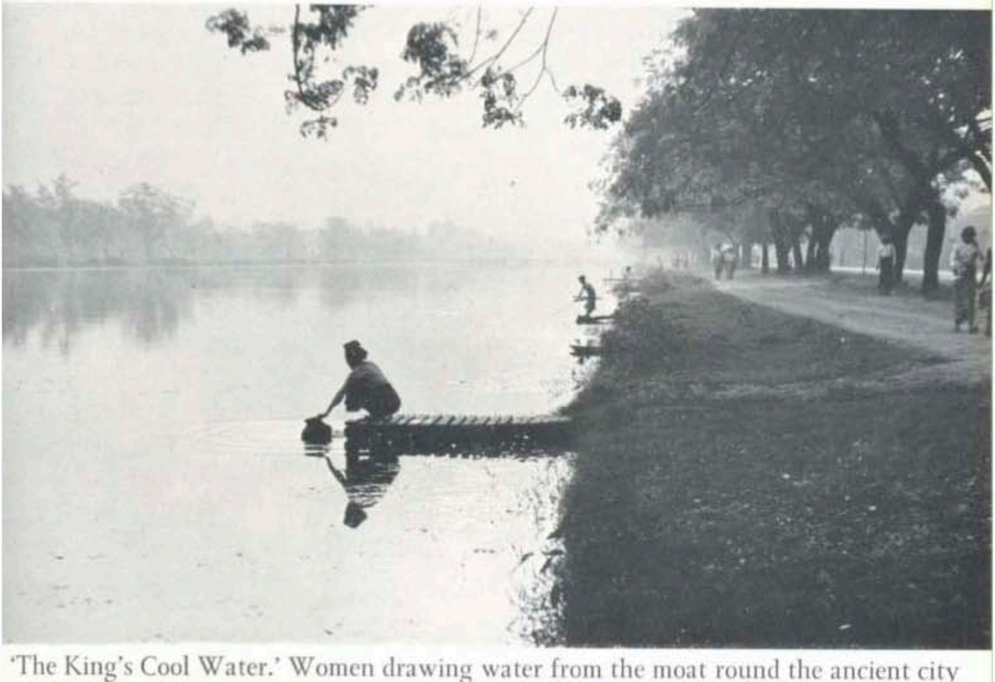
There was no means of residing at this centre and both Instructor and pupils would return to their homes at night. At the same centre a monk was also giving instruction, and very naturally the monk (who obviously new nothing of anatta, no self, in actual experience) did not like a rival, more especially a layman, and one who was attracting more pupils than himself. So U Thein's pupils, including Daw Nyunt, now aged thirty, started looking for a meditation centre of their own. They eventually came upon a former prince's pleasure garden, which they bought and called Maha Bodhi, planting the necessary Bodhi or wisdom tree to justify its name materially as well as spiritually. Maha Bodhi means Great Wisdom. Here Daw Nyunt came to live and practice meditation for twelve hours a day.

She never did things by halves. When she started meditation she not only threw aside her jewels, leaving holes in her ears where the earrings had been, but also gave up her three Burmese vices of smoking, chewing betel and eating pickled tea, while all the time she meditated strenuously, too strenuously in fact, for after three years the strain began to tell on her health.

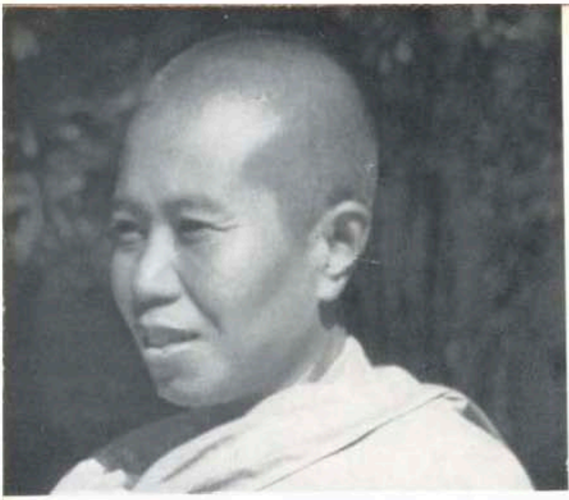
The centre had grown rapidly during those three years. It had started with only a cook and very few permanent residents. But now the work of management was getting beyond the cook's capacity. Therefore, when her doctor said she must give up meditation for a time, U Thein suggested she should take on instead the work of manager, and meditate only in her spare time. This she did and her health recovered. She was now thirty-seven. She still cherished the desire to return to full-time meditation and leave the world altogether as a nun. But her mother would not give her consent until she was forty. Then 'phyit-pyet', she said happily. She had worked for other people all these years. After she was forty, she would work for herself!



Pagoda Hill, Mandalay, as probably seen at dawn in 1938 *(photo: U Aye Bo)*



'The King's Cool Water.' Women drawing water from the moat round the ancient city of Mandalay. They carry the huge earthenware pots on their heads *(photo: U Aye Bo)*


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b

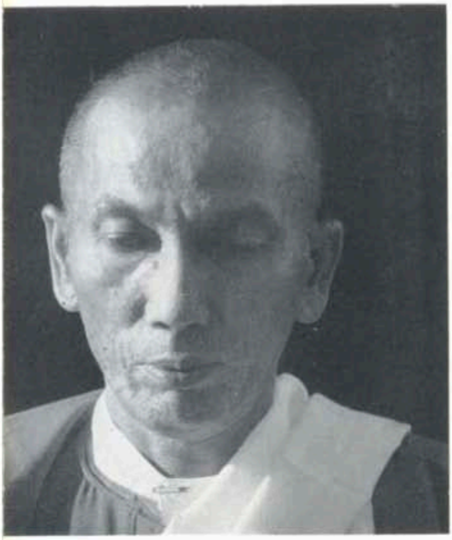
a. Sayalay Daw Saranawati. The nun who acted as interpreter

b. Daw Nyunt. The temporal head of the Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre
(photo: U Aye Bo)

c. Saya U Thein, the instructor in meditation at the Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre *(photo: U Aye Bo)*

d. U Aye Bo—who adopted the author as his elder sister *(photo: U Aye Bo)*

e. Daw Toke Gale, who came to Sydney to study welfare work and started the journey into Burmese silence
(photo: U Aye Bo)


c

d


e



The trouble was, there was no one else to do her work in the Centre. She was not only the heart of kindness in the Centre but she obviously had the same business ability as her merchant mother and sisters, though as far as I could see her idea of keeping the cash safe was to leave it lying about in empty cigarette tins! She not only had to attend to building construction, the housing of the guests and the housekeeping, and looking after everyone's day-to-day needs, but also she assisted the Instructor at every initiation ceremony, and sometimes when any of the women 'felt things', this did not mean merely sitting in meditation for three hours with the novices.

There was the usual charming little Buddha shrine on the verandah of her cottage where fresh flowers were placed every day, and every day the vessels were washed and filled with pure clean water, and food placed as an offering, later to be thrown to the birds. But there was no Buddha image, 'Because so many people have to come and see Daw Nyunt. If there were a Buddha image they would have to pay respect (with their faces on the floor) and that would be most inconvenient for them!' She had an elderly lady meditator living with her, one of those who had not risen above the lifetime custom of the Burmese of always having someone sleeping in the same room, and therefore did not like to sleep alone. Beside the little shrine there was one of the triangular bell-shaped gongs seen in all temples and Dhamma Halls with a deep echoing sound which continues to vibrate long after it has been struck. After Daw Nyunt and her fellow meditators had 'said their prayers' they would strike the bell to distribute the merit. And later on, when I had made some small donations to various meditation centres, I was shown how to strike the bell myself so as to distribute the merit.

U Aye Bo went home and Sarana and I waited at Daw Nyunt's cottage as the Instructor had asked. I cannot remember what happened or what he said, but as a result we came to a complete understanding. He apparently had thought I was like some of the learned monks who know the Pali Tripitaka by heart and are very proud of their learning, but in fact know nothing at all from

actual experience. He now said he had complete confidence in me—it is more necessary for a teacher to have confidence in a pupil than the reverse. Thence on these informal *tête-à- têtes* on Daw Nyunt's verandah became part of the order of nearly every evening. I say 'informal', but of course we went down with our faces on our hands on the floor when he came in. It is hard for a Westerner to appreciate the Easterner's awe and reverence of the pupil for the teacher, a veneration which must be very likely to breed pride and self-conceit in the teacher and likewise tend to dim the Inner Light as well as weaken the self-dependence of the pupil. I never acquired any sense of reverence for U Thein as a guru, nor regarded him as less fallible than a University lecturer, but he taught a subject infinitely more worthwhile than philosophy or history and he was utterly truthful and also humble, and never afraid to say he did not know. It was this that now inspired confidence. Further, he was not trying to teach something of which he was not master. But, for the rest, he was a human being and perhaps somewhat addicted to smoking cheroots!

And who was this Instructor, U Thein? He was not 'a learned man', as he himself said, and that precisely was his advantage. Were he learned I might have thought I knew more. But he taught from experience, and experience of what I did not know. He was born in 1897, the only son of six children of a farming couple who lived in a village eight miles south of Rangoon. As has been customary for boys in Burma from times forgotten, he attended the local monastery school from the age of six until twelve. He then went on to a lay school where he remained until he was seventeen. When he was only a child of fourteen, the thought suddenly flashed through his mind that each day a man ought to acquire either knowledge, wealth or merit, and this gave him an objective for the rest of his life.

On leaving school his father wanted him to carry on with farm work, but he had no mind to look after his father's fields, so his father sent him to be a rice-seller in Rangoon and he slipped into the merchant's life more comfortably. At twenty (as we would put it), 'chance' took him to Mandalay, or (as he would put it), 'being destined to carry out the Buddhist mission in

Upper Burma he found himself in Mandalay', where he met Daw Daw Mi, the only daughter of Mandalay merchants, and married her. At twenty-six the couple returned to Rangoon with their children, and he worked first as a clerk and then as a merchant in a large village some miles out, where among other important things such as a post office and a high school, there was also a Vipassana Meditation Centre, a seven-turreted brick building presided over by Saya Thet, to which about a thousand people—monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, came annually. The Centre had been built by Saya Thet's own parents and was quite possibly one of the earliest lay meditation centres in Burma.

He worked hard at earning the daily bread for his wife and children and it was not until he was thirty-seven that he spared time to take a month's holiday. After ten days of this well-earned rest, he suddenly realized that despite his firm endeavour at the age of fourteen, the days were slipping by and he was acquiring neither wealth, knowledge nor merit. Of the three, merit seemed to be the only one he had much chance of acquiring, and he went to Saya Thet with regard to practising meditation. For seven days he meditated in the seven-turreted compound. His instructor was delighted with his progress in the breathing method, and put him under the special care of the assistant instructor, Saya Nyo, who was equally satisfied. He would have liked to spend the rest of the holiday at the Centre. But duty called him back to work. However, his mission in life was now clear. He and his wife were conducting a shop on a steamer plying between Rangoon and Mandalay. He would keep his mind on the Dhamma during working hours and spend all his spare time in meditation. After three months of practice he had 'wonderful happenings'. He did not understand what these 'wonderful happenings' meant, and as soon as the boat tied up at Rangoon once again, he went off to Saya Thet to find out. His teacher said, 'Well done!' three times and prophesied a very worthwhile future for the employment of his talent, at the same time warning him not to be led astray from his true destiny by doing good works and kind acts. The gift of the Dhamma is the greatest of all gifts, the Buddhist scriptures repeatedly tell us. He who can give that should not waste his energy by giving lesser things. One final warning he was given,

not to attempt to be an instructor before he was fifty years of age. (One may be forgiven for asking whether the priests, clergymen and pastors of the Christian Church might not be better able to fulfil their mission if they were given a similar warning.)

He returned to his boat and once again every spare moment was devoted to Vipassana meditation practice, and he showed his wife and children how likewise to practice.

For three years this continued. Then, when he was forty years of age, he told his wife that after another five years he felt he must leave the householder's life and devote himself to meditation. 'I have supported you and the children for twenty years. When I am forty-five will you give your permission for me to leave home for the sake of meditation?' His wife realizing the situation perfectly well, gave her consent without any hesitation. So he worked for five years more and then in 1942, the middle of the world war and the Japanese occupation, when Mandalay was being scourged by British and American bombs, he left his family and went to the Sagaing Hills where he meditated in a cave for three months. His wife took over the conduct of the merchant's business and she and the children supported him. He could not sufficiently express his gratitude for their kindness and understanding, and every day he sent them thoughts of bound- less loving kindness and because of this, he said, they all remained safe and sound through the miseries of the war.

After three months he returned to his home, but he could not stay peacefully there. He would wander from pagoda to pagoda meditating in quiet places in solitude and silence. He also preached and persuaded people of the value of meditation.

Then, at the prescribed age of fifty the first pupils appeared. They were sisters and he became their instructor. In the same year they were followed by thirty-five men including the local schoolmaster. And now Daw Nyunt and other merchant ladies joined the fast-increasing group which soon numbered one thousand. The war was over. They must build a proper meditation centre. U Thein carefully omitted all reference to the jealousy of the monk who wanted his own Centre for himself. U Thein consistently refused to say anything disparaging of

anyone. They separated into groups of five or six to find the right locality. Four months passed. He happened to meet Daw Nyunt who said that despite all their eagerness they had still not found the right place. 'All right,' he said, 'I'll wait ten days more. If within that time you cannot find it, I shall leave for the Thitsagu Hills and meditate alone.'

Next day Daw Nyunt went out by herself and came to the Yeiktha Kyaukpadaung, a former prince's pleasure garden. It was exactly right. She took U Thein there and the owner, U Htun. A meeting of meditators was then called in nearby King Mindon's Maha Bodhi Pagoda and the price fixed. The Centre became a fact. Its first supporters were nearly all leading merchant women. That was in 1947. When I stayed there in 1958, the I records showed that over 300,000 people—monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, had meditated within the former prince's pleasure garden.

And U Thein's wife and daughters now carry on the business of the shop on the Irrawaddy steamer. When the boat comes to Mandalay her husband meets her; they go through the accounts together, and when the boat leaves he goes down to it to bid her farewell. The wife and daughters also meditate, but only at night, for their busy day leaves them no other time. U Thein has never donned the yellow robes except for short periods, as when shortly after I left Mandalay he became a monk for sixty days to meditate alone. For the rest, he and his wife, though they see each other seldom, are still comrades 'in the meritorious life'.

The two ladies and the children who attended the Christian school left soon after Christmas. The little boy had especially impressed me. Not only had he remained perfectly still and wakeful during that long four hours of meditation in the Dhamma Hall, but at meal times he behaved with the decorum of an adult meditator, eating his food circumspectly and in silence, helping himself without hurry or greed, and when he had finished, rinsing his foody hand in the finger-bowl provided, wiping it on the napkin and quietly leaving the table. I suggested that perhaps when he was grown up he might come to Australia

and teach our little boys how to meditate. He replied shyly, ‘Perhaps I will.’

No sooner had this party left than another family party arrived. They came from the Shan States, where there was a daughter Centre presided over by a monk who had learned at Maha Bodhi. The lady at the head of this party acted as interpreter of the local dialect. Sarana and I were in the Dhamma Hall when they came in to pay respect to the Instructor. They put down before him a gift of food and nodded their heads towards us to indicate that we might share the merit. So we, too, went down on our faces to offer the gift, a gift which of course would be shared by all at the Centre and the merit thereof among all sentient beings. There was a little girl in this party, but she was very different from the little boy in the other. She jumped about in the usual jack-in-a-box manner of the European child, and could not sit still even at meals. There was also a lady who had a very worried look. ‘Is she a meditator?’ I asked Sarana. ‘Yes.’ ‘Then why does she look so worried? Surely a meditator ought to have risen above worry?’ The answer was that it was all a matter of karma and that she would be worse if she did not meditate. Unlike her, the leader of the party had an extraordinarily serene and tranquil face, and this I later found was the usual characteristic of nearly all meditators.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIFE AT THE CENTRE

After the misunderstanding with Instructor Saya U Thein had been happily resolved, life assumed an harmonious daily routine. At 4 a.m. the huge triangular gong boomed four times across the eighty huts and cottages of the meditation compound and the mist-covered rice fields beyond. It was the signal for meditators to arise and commence the day's work. But in fact, many had already been up perhaps a couple of hours or more because either they had gone to sleep before 10 p.m., or because they had found less sleep necessary when meditating. When I crawled out of the mosquito net and the eiderdown sleeping-bag spread on the bamboo mat over the floor of the hut, usually about 1 a.m., the Great Bear hung like a blazing kite in the northern sky; but by four o'clock it had become caught in the branches of the tree overhead. A few yoga exercises, a mouth wash and drink of hot water from a thermos and I sat down to meditate, changing from time to time to lying position, until the mundane sound of the kitchen gong called to rice-gruel at 6 a.m. Gongs and bells had been ringing from surrounding monasteries on and off since midnight, but one soon learned to distinguish one's own. It is cold at nights in Mandalay in the winter, especially in those huts, which like mine, were built on piers over the water, and a warm cardigan and light overcoat were necessary for breakfast comfort.

The first faint rays of dawn were stealing through the shadowed garden as we stumbled along the cobbled paths to the fluorescent-lit dining shed, usually passing on the way a tiny group of meditators sitting on their heels with their backs to a small fire they had built against a large log. The dining shed was

open on two sides except for a low wooden trellis to keep out the dogs. We slipped off our sandals at the gateway, and silently sat down on bamboo mats placed beside low round tables perhaps twelve inches high, simultaneously ‘paying respect’ with heads touching hands on the floor three times, first to the Instructor, then to the monks if they were already there—if they came later we broke off eating in order to do the same after they came in. An old lady who dressed in a shabby longyi (but who was in fact very wealthy) served out thin rice-gruel from a large aluminium pan and Burmese tea unmilked and unsugared from a perfectly ordinary aluminium teapot.

Before we ate we silently remembered the donors of the food and prayed that they might be well and happy. Then we reminded ourselves that the food we ate was not eaten for pleasure but only to nourish the body and that, even as we ate it, it was being transmuted into blood, sinews, flesh, waste products. Above us was a large notice board with the Rules for Dining, which Sarana translated as she sat huddled beside me in a warm blanket:

‘The Lord Buddha advised that all meditators should be mindful while they eat. They should ever bear in mind that whatever is placed upon the table is only material, and like all things around us, ceaselessly changing. External things, which we call matter, meet internal things, which we call mental, and all are forever ceaselessly coming together and dissolving. All things are in a state of ceaseless flux and flow, creation and destruction. When you bring all things in the universe within your mindfulness concerning their ceaseless change, light will come to you and you will see that they are selfless and without ego. The mind commands that the body eats; the body does the action of eating. Thus mind and matter meet. If you are mindful of these things while you eat, you will find what is Beyond mind and matter, Beyond ‘nama rupa’, name and form.

‘Be mindful in all your actions—not only in eating and in drinking, but in all. Do not be slothful but continue concentrated and mindful always, so that you gain insight into the nature of things as they really are.

‘When you drink tea it is customary to talk a little. It is then pleasing to talk about the Dhamma, the Law, but it is not proper to talk about politics, current affairs, family matters, commercial concerns, or about friends. Nothing except the Dhamma should be talked of.

‘These Rules for Dining are given for your help. If you wish to succeed in meditation, follow them carefully.’

The food eaten, we again reminded ourselves that all is impermanent—the food, the donors of the food and the eater of the food. We then washed our hands in the bowl, still mindful of what we were doing. Sometimes the devout again ‘paid respect’ with their heads to the floor. We rose as silently as we had sat and with the same mindfulness slipped on sandals and went over to our respective cottages, if we so desired, for a little extra food. U Aye Bo and his sister, Daw Ma Ma Lay, had provided for the Australian—coffee, toast, tinned butter and jam and sometimes tinned fruit. They could never be persuaded that Burmese food was really much nicer, but their thoughtfulness will show how determined they were that no outward discomfort should impede my practice of meditation; and I had not known these people before the plane dropped down at Mandalay! Sometimes I almost wept at the inexpressible kindness to a foreigner.

At 7 a.m. when we returned to our huts to meditate, the sun had risen ‘like thunder over China’ and was high above the heads of the toddy palms silhouetted against the low misted hills, but the light was still poor and the air still too cool to remove the cardigan and overcoat. Often the same small group was snatching a few further minutes of warmth from the fire at the large log.

The rice-gruel was the first food we had eaten since 11 a.m. the day before. I formulated a theory that light food in the stomach takes the blood away from the grey matter of the brain and therefore makes the stilling of the thoughts easier. It is not at all an orthodox theory. But I found the 7 to 10 a.m. period by far the best for meditation.

When the 10 a.m. gong rang for lunch the sun was hot. I slipped on slacks and blouse, for I had not dressed for breakfast, and the same ritual of 'paying respect' was performed as we entered the dining shed for lunch. My kind friends had provided a special cook for me so that there would be good vegetarian food, for everyone else ate meat and chillies. He cooked the daintiest and tastiest dishes without either, and often it seemed as if he took an almost fiendish delight in trying to make me disobey the stern notice above. He spoke a few words of English. I once protested that there were ten different dishes. He replied solemnly, 'No, eight!' But if you counted the rice and fruit, there were in fact, ten. I was placed at a table by myself, partly because there would not have been room at the one table for both meat and vegetarian dishes, and partly because a vegetarian is not expected to like sitting at table with dead animals on it. The Burmese nearly all eat meat, but in their heart of hearts they know that vegetarians are really following the Buddha's teaching better. Of course everything was eaten with the fingers, but an aluminium finger-bowl and napkins were provided, and these made dining much pleasanter than in India where you had to take the body hand to the tap to wash it. I could eat very little of each of the dainty dishes, and the cook would get quite worried and could not understand that I am a small eater always and that less food still is required when meditating. The Instructor also ate very little. A Burmese meal consists of a huge mountain of rice and many savoury dishes, followed with tea and fruit. As after breakfast, we went over to our respective cottages for a little extra—U Aye Bo had very kindly provided fresh milk for this last course.

From lunch until noon was a free period when we washed our clothes as well as our bodies. The usual Burmese bathroom has no door and both men and women wash under their longyis gracefully slipping on the dry one on top and the wet one off from underneath so that they never appear naked. 'But I expect you want to wash naked?' asked Sarana. I confessed to this weakness. No matter, a cottage with an inside bathroom was found. It had been used by Daw Nyunt when she had been ill. There was a double concrete tank, the top section fed by a tap

from a pipe which came from the large tank which was in turn fed from the artesian water pumped up for the use of the nearby university and its hostels. The water in the top section must be used for washing the head only and there was a special aluminium bowl to dip it out. Another bowl must be used for drawing the water from the lower section to be used for washing the rest of the body and the clothes. U Aye Bo had thoughtfully provided the foreigner with an enamel bowl so that she could wash in her own dirty water instead of having to pour everything over herself and her clothes, It seemed strange that in this lady's boudoir there should not be the least suspicion of a mirror. I had a tiny mirror about two inches in diameter, but I kept it severely at the bottom of my kit and had nothing better than the reflection in the moat to see whether the parting in the hair was straight. None the less, despite the precept about no cosmetics or personal adornment, I noticed that both the Instructor and Daw Nyunt always titivated up their scarves and what-not, and in Daw Nyunt's case, her hair, whenever I wanted to photograph them. I once produced my tiny mirror to assist the process—Burmese have a sense of humour and laughed every tine.

It was only during the lunch periods that photos were possible. When the fortnight's vow of silence was over, I ventured outside the compound towards the village for this purpose. The cook-girl saw me and literally shoved me back through a side gate. My return was greeted with shrieks of hilarity, in which U Thein joined as heartily as any. Whatever had I done? The laughter seemed to ripple along the path after me as I went in search of Sarana. When she was at length found, it turned out that the cook-girl thought I had got lost—more peals of laughter! Next time, Daw Nyunt and Sarana came with me so that the cook-girl should have no more anxiety. It was a basket-makers' village, and the most exquisitely dainty basketware was woven from cane brought down from northern Burma.

The afternoon meditation period from noon until 5 p.m. was the hottest part of the day. When I opened the three wooden shutters of the hut, the sun that streamed in had very obviously come from near the tropics. The huts were eight feet by six, with

a bamboo roof which has to be replaced once in seven years, walls of weatherboard and floorboards spaced a quarter of an inch apart—just wide enough to receive pencils and pens—and jewellery; but of course, meditators ought not to have jewellery! The spaces were hardly wide enough to accommodate artificial teeth, but it seemed safer to wait until daylight before tipping the toothwater out through the window. The only furniture was bamboo mats. There were nails in the walls on which to hang the mosquito-net, nails which made yoga exercises, especially the head-stand, a little dangerous in the darkness before dawn.

During the first few days the 12 to 5 p.m. period would tend to drag a little, and I would give up and walk mindfully around the lake repeating the breathing mantram I had invented. Sometimes, too, this period would be disturbed by students from the university droning their lessons aloud, and sometimes by sightseers taking photographs which seemed to require the accompaniment of loud voices. I found, however, that if I appeared at the door with meditator's scarf around shoulders, finger on lips, and whispered 'Teo Teo', the offenders would at once depart silently.

Towards the end of the month, the 5 p.m. bell became an unwelcome sound. So does one grow into silence. When we emerged from our huts the last rays of the setting sun were gilding the stocks of rice in the fields and the white pagoda on Mandalay hill beyond them. U Aye Bo, anxious for my health, had provided lime juice and glucose, which were not supposed to contain food, and I conveniently forgot that Mahatma Gandhi frequently broke his fasts by taking a spoonful of lime juice or something equally foodless. Between 5 and 6 p.m. most made a feeble attempt at a very short gentle walk, while I went for a double quick one along the road or over the rice fields. Once some boy-students took me over the university grounds, and on another occasion some girl-students took me through their hostel, where they had to sit at tables and chairs and eat with knives and forks.

There was a shrine room in the girls' hostel with the usual pretty-pretty gilt and jewel ornaments; for Burma is not a secular state; Buddhism is the state religion and other religions are

merely tolerated. The girls 'said their prayers' in the shrine room every morning; this was not compulsory, but only Christians and Moslims stayed away.

The students were taught in English; this made life easy for those who had gone to a Christian school where the tuition was also in English; and it made it very hard for those who had gone to government schools and not learned English until they were twelve. I was told there was a move afoot to teach the international language in government schools also, as was the case in British days, but not because there was any suggestion that Christian schools won converts now.

At 6 p.m. it was dark. The girls and boys must be in their respective hostels and I must be within our compound, because, said Sarana, there were many bad people about! After talking with U Thein on Daw Nyunt's verandah, we returned to our huts by torch light. After that there was silence and the night was disturbed only by the occasional splash of a large fish in the water under the hut, or the sound of a monastery bell at midnight.

Some may think that the regime was an austere one. Those who have stayed at the large meditation centre in Rangoon will say it was most luxurious; and I say it was the middle way. There was happiness everywhere, but there were no books, no gossip, no newspapers, no wireless, very little talk. Six hours' sleep was the standard thing, but if you overslept it showed the body needed extra sleep, and nature's needs must never be violated. U Thein slept no more than four hours and this probably applied to Daw Nyunt also, for her day was a very full one and her only time for meditation at night. To me it was good life and completely satisfying, and I could only wish that it were possible to live such a life for a month every year.

Did I say 'no wireless'? The meditation centre had none. But it seemed that all the surrounding small villages did, or if not wirelesses, then gramophones with loudspeakers, and generally the strains of Europeanized Burmese music would start up long before the gong for rice-gruel. As my ears are not musical these wirelesses troubled me far less than our own. But the band of the

military training centre attached to the university, was another matter. This appeared to come to life soon after our 4 a.m. bell.

I pictured the army marching out to the strains of ‘Pack up your troubles’ and ‘Tipperary’, but the ‘Left-right-left’ was in Burmese. On Christmas Day there was a valiant attempt at ‘Christians awake, salute the happy morn’, but in fact before morn all was peaceful again, and Christmas Day ushered in a long period of indescribable peace and joy.

CHAPTER FIVE

PROGRESS AND DISTRACTIONS

The new technique, phyit-.pyet with great speed, did not interrupt the long periods of successful concentration. On the contrary, it improved it. Restlessness disappeared; health was excellent; it was possible to concentrate at night without becoming sleepy. The phyit-pyet changed themselves and became like electricity passing between negative and positive poles, so quickly it could not be perceived; then they changed again and became like a whirling mass of atoms too rapid to comprehend. These phenomena were all satisfactory. But most interesting was the fact that during the week after Christmas, and subsequently for longer than a week, all bowel movement completely stopped, and then in each case recommenced easily and naturally as if nothing had happened. During the second of these two weeks U Thein had commenced inquiring about these bodily matters exactly like a doctor, and he advised doing nothing about it. It was the Dhamma. How it is possible to take the normal amount of food without elimination and yet remain in perfect health, I do not know, but there it was. Medical science can explain it—perhaps!

Five days after Christmas the party from the Shan States went on pilgrimage to Mohnyin, where there is a famous pagoda and a meditation centre which practises the loving kindness method. They took Sarana and Daw Nyunt with them, so that the evening conferences with U Thein ceased for three days.

The afternoon of the day they left there was the first break in the peaceful continuity of concentration. For some unknown reason I got bored, bored to tears. I felt I could stand meditation no longer. I was tired of seeing the body forever changing, never still. Why had I come? Why had one door after another opened

to let me come? It all seemed utterly futile. I longed to escape from the prison house—to run, jump, skip, climb Mandalay Hill. I was weary of it all, and now I came to think of it, I was hungry too, and there would be no more food until the sun had set and was about to rise again!

I left the hut and sat on the banks of the shady moat, and stopped trying to meditate. Shadows rippled across the quiet waters, stirred by the faint breeze that came and went. The mood that had almost wept with the beauty of loving kindness had changed to a mood of boredom, and that in turn would change before the night had brightened into dawn. All things must always change. There was only the Dhamma that held all, and changing moods of elation and depression were merged in it and lost. And there was no 'I' to mind what happened. And this was all the wrong way of doing things, and the kind Instructor would not approve, but there was no self to mind that either. Gradually the mood of depression weakened. And then at 5 p.m. some boy-students came past and suggested taking me over the university. It seemed like the answer of Providence to my prayer.

After Sarana returned and the incident was reported to U Thein, he said, 'And did you get relief?' 'Yes.' 'It is a pity you got relief. That was an opportunity to face pain without trying to end it, and you did not take it. When you try to escape from pain, it only returns. But if you face it and ask yourself who feels the pain, you find there is no self. You then overcome it and it will not return.'

The day following that of boredom, there was a suspicion of a shooting pain and a little itching from faint imaginary worms, but not enough to trouble, while during a two and a half hour period of absorption there was a sudden breaking through of a beautiful white-blue light where the third eye is said to be situated in the middle of the forehead. It was a great temptation to look at its beauty, but the temptation was resisted. When this was later reported, U Thein endorsed the resistance to the temptation to follow the distraction. Such distractions hindered progress, as if a mountain-climber stopped to have afternoon tea with his friends at a pleasant tea-shop with a fine view. I smiled at the idea of tea-parties on the icy mountain slopes of either

New Zealand or China, where only crampons and ice-axe prevent the climber from being swept to his next incarnation, and where he is lucky if he finds the lower lip of a crevasse for his luncheon place. But, of course, U Thein had in mind the picture of pilgrims sedately walking up the well-paved paths of the Sagaing Hills with tea-shops at the principal shrines.

I am more than satisfied that his advice is utterly sound. Too often the spiritual aspirant gloats over these visions and ecstasies and reports them as something important, whereas they only lead astray from the main path which is the finding in actual experience of the nature of things as they really are. Pleasure as well as pain must be transcended.

The next days of meditation continued uneventfully and successfully, two hours of complete absorption being fairly common, and once there was loss of feeling that the body belonged to me.

After fourteen days the vow of silence, that is of not talking to English-speaking people (except U Aye Bo and Sarana), came to an end and U Aye Bo insisted that I was now free to go out into the world and see a Burmese documentary film. I was away from 11.30 to 1 p.m. He introduced his particular friend, U Thant, who had set up his own studio for producing films, having acquired all his knowledge from books and without going to Hollywood. I was offered tea with milk, which I dutifully refused, it being after twelve noon. The theatre was gaunt and bare compared with our luxurious palaces. It would probably be described as clean but shabby. However, as Mandalay's streets were then unpaved, perhaps it was as well there were no wall-to-wall carpets, for even in winter the dust would be termed 'inches thick'. The film was a very interesting study of Burmese life, but I was not sorry to get back to the Centre, and refused another invitation to view a film, even though it contained 'much Dhamma'. It was easy to see that watching shows is not merely a waste of precious time when meditating, but also a distraction which makes meditating more difficult.

That afternoon there was the first really good sensation of imaginary worms walking over the skin, which I had been given

to understand would quite likely be a disturbing factor. It is because of these imaginary worms or flies that one is advised to meditate under a mosquito net so as not to mistake the imaginary for the genuine article.

That evening Sarana was helping to iron table cloths with a charcoal iron. Tomorrow was Independence Day. U Thein would feed thirty monks to commemorate his sixtieth birthday, several young men would be ordained as monks, and there would be a holiday from meditation.

There was a word which frequently punctuated Sarana's conversation. To my unphonetic ear it sounded like 'ponies', but it turned out to be 'phongyis'. The nearest translation is 'monks'; phongyis differ in many respects from monks, but they differ far more from priests, the other term sometimes used in translation. They usually live in small monasteries and are supposed to keep 227 Vinaya rules of discipline. These rules are concerned with outward good conduct and in most cases were obviously made as occasion arose to prevent the repetition of unseemly behaviour. The monks also take ten precepts, the first nine of which were the same of those taken by meditators in residence. The tenth, that of not handling gold and silver, is found in the Vinaya, but as a controversy raged at a Council held one hundred years after the Buddha's death, as to whether it was or was not a rule, the scholar may doubt whether it was among the rules promulgated by the Buddha himself. Monks today adhere to the rule by allowing boy novices to handle the money for them.

When I came to the Centre there were no monks in residence, but that they did sometimes come there was indicated by certain buildings which had fretwork along the ridges and eaves, an adornment of buildings reserved for phongyi-khaungs, dwellings for monks, and Dhamma Halls. Occasionally an orange-robed one would wander through the grounds—the Scriptures talk of yellow or saffron, but Burmese monks mostly wear a bright orange.

It is customary for every man to spend, as a monk, a period of nine to twenty-eight days once at least during his life. Independence Day was to be celebrated by the ordination of four

young men of the Jewellers' Guild. This evening their ordination as novices was to take place in our Dhamma Hall. Carpets had been specially laid and I sat down, as it happened, beside a man who had been born and bred a Catholic and educated in a Catholic school, and who therefore spoke perfect English.

The young men had had their heads shaved beforehand to save time. We watched while they put on orange longyis over their lay attire, secured them firmly with orange belts, and then slipped the lay attire off from underneath. After that they put on the enormous orange oversheet, which serves as the top robe. They had difficulty in adjusting it and needed help from the monks present. Then followed the ceremony conducted by one of the older monks. The words spoken had to be repeated by them with exactly the correct pronunciation, and the older monk, who had a sweet, kind smile, very patiently repeated the words over and over again—our Instructor occasionally assisting—until the young men got the pronunciation perfectly. The older monk then gave them their names 'in religion', U Thein delivered a short discourse on meditation and the Preacher of the Dhamma one on morality.

Meantime, as if to emphasize that they might not eat after twelve, coffee and sweet biscuits were served to all the visitors, all except a few men who were busy stitching brand new big black lacquer bowls into orange webbing to make them easier to carry by the new monks. Along with each bowl were the requisites allowed to monks, such as razor, needle and cotton and water strainer. My ex-Catholic friend told me he had thoroughly enjoyed his spell of being a monk because people were so interested in his conversion to the religion of his ancestors that they treated him extra well. He had been married before the period spent as a monk and he said that three of these young men were also married and that one of them had promised to spend a whole month as a monk, and the others lesser periods down to nine days.

U Thein had declared Independence Day to be a holiday. I should rather have called it an un-holy-day. The holiday appeared to begin this evening. I went to the fluorescent-lit dining shed to write up the account of the ceremony. Everyone

began laughing and talking in a most un-yogi-like way. Then U Thein's wife, daughters and son-in-law arrived and there was much photographing. As has been said, his wife and daughters managed a travelling shop on a steamer from Rangoon to Mandalay. He had taught them to meditate. I asked if they found time to meditate despite their busy life. They admitted they had little time, but said they did so before they retired to sleep. The newly ordained novice monks came in, and we all paid respect while they sat solemn and unmoved, Would they afterwards, at the height of passionate youth, remember that the only time respect was paid to them was when they had in effect taken vows of poverty, chastity and self-restraint? Burma has no population problem like India, mainly due to a conveniently high death rate (but not as high as India's). Might the absence of overpopulation be partly due to the fact that all her young men have spent some time as monks and that always people have before them the respect shown to those who wear the yellow robe of chastity, and restraint?

That night, as I went to my hut, the full moon was reflected on the waters of the lake and vying with it in beauty, the green fluorescent light at the top of the Bodhi tree of the nearby white pagoda. It was a beautiful night, but not peaceful. Gramophones with loud-speakers or perhaps wirelesses blared out their music all night long. I rose about midnight and meditated upon anatta. There is no 'I' to be disturbed by the raucous music. There is only a hearing organ and the object of hearing and consciousness connecting them; there is no 'I' to be distressed by a heap of dead fowls near the kitchen specially slain for the Holy or Unholy day. There is only the seeing organ and the object of sight and consciousness connecting them; there is no 'I' to suffer from the unpleasant smell of those dead fowls and other animals being cooked; there is only a smelling organ and the object of smell and consciousness connecting them. And all these things are forever changing—Phyit-pyet, in-out, creation and destruction, no permanent self anywhere, but only ceaseless change!

Carpets had been laid down for breakfast and the ironed table cloths spread upon the tables for the visitors and monks, while a

special rice-gruel was concocted, which contained pork. As pork was taboo in Sarana's family, both she and I breakfasted away from the unpleasant smells caused by the cooking of animals, fowls and fish.

The ceremony which was to transform the novices into full-time monks was to take place after breakfast, not before, as in the case of a Catholic Mass, for instance. After breakfast friends and relatives began to arrive, and followed the monks and novices along the road to the ancient Ordination Hall situated right in the middle of the University grounds. At Sarana's request I wore a skirt instead of slacks, 'because so many phongyis are about', but I never felt quite safe sitting on the ground in skirts, for unlike longyis they are apt to disclose a wealth of leg which is considered most indecent.

The phongyi-khaung adjoining the Ordination Hall had been removed to make room for the University buildings, but the Hall itself and the pagoda were too sacred to be removed. It was a small Hall with pillars instead of walls at three sides, and a Buddha shrine in the inner recess. Women were not allowed to set foot upon the sacred floor. A few yards away was the military training ground and students, dressed, according to Burmese ideas indecently, in shorts alone, were training at basket ball, completely oblivious of the sacred rites taking place. The four novices of the night before took up their position squatting and the two monks who were instructing them sat in their midst. The ceremony lasted a very long time, for again they had to be very particular about the pronunciation. As I had now no kind ex-Catholic to tell me what was happening, I closed my eyes and meditated. Press-photographers hovered around, and when I opened my eyes I found cameras pointing at me also. Sarana asked that any pictures taken of the European meditator should not appear until after she had left the Centre. I could hardly believe that the Press would be so accommodating, but she assured me it would, for everyone respected meditators.

When the ceremony was at length finished, the male friends and relatives wandered in and out of the Ordination Hall, and a heap of stacked-up presents was handed to them for the newly ordained ones. The Press-photographers climbed on to the

pagoda to get better pictures, but being a female and therefore 'unclean', I was not allowed to do likewise. As we got into the car to return, the driver, an educated young merchant, remarked nonchalantly, 'Of course men are superior to women because only men can don the yellow robe, and that is the most superior of all!'

On our return, the mountain of dead animals and fish was consumed by monks, visitors and residents. Some of the monks fed in the Dhamma Hall. They were those of the stricter sect whose members do not smoke or ride in gharries or any man- or animal-drawn vehicle, but only in cars. The monks of the broader (?) views dined in the dining shed. Sarana looked after two nun friends who had arrived, one of them being the nun who had ordained her. I dined by myself.

I was retiring to my hut for meditation and an endeavour to banish the distractions of the night and morning, when U Thein sent for me. I obediently returned, to be introduced to his 'officer' disciples, that is, the members of the civil or public service who practised meditation. I remember especially the head of the taxation department and the judge. They were dining in the dining shed seated on carpets and, of course, all spoke English. We chatted pleasantly about this and that, and the judge, who was smoking cigarettes, agreed that the Buddha would probably not have approved of tobacco any more than Gandhi did.

Being shown off to heads of government departments was quite amusing but did not conduce to meditation on 'Anatta' (no self), and I left them as soon as I could gracefully do so. But when I got back to my hut I found that some of the visitors had found the plank-way over the moat leading past my hut a suitable place on which to do their week's laundry. When in Rome, think as the Romans think, and doing one's laundry on a holiday, Independence Day of all days, was apparently thought the right thing by these particular Romans. Therefore I made no attempt to place my finger on my lips and say 'Daw Daw' nor point to the notice which spoke of respect for 'our Buddhist silence'. Instead, I went inside, shut the door and sat down to meditate on 'There is no self to be pained by the noise of laundry

being thrashed with a wooden stick on wooden boards, nor by talking in extra loud voices—Burmese voices are not soft like those of Indians. There is only the hearing organ and the object of the hearing and consciousness which connects them, and these are forever changing.' The strident voices of the laundry ladies also provided an excellent opportunity for studying dukkha (pain or suffering). I once started to get up to find a quieter place in the garden— for anywhere would have been quieter than this. Then I remembered that if one seeks relief from pain, it will only come again. The thing to do is to try and transcend it. What an admirable lesson the Dhamma was sending! How foolish not to learn it! I repeated again and again, 'There is no self which suffers, but only a hearing organ which impinges on strident voices, and both are changing.' After two and a half hours they did in fact change. The tumult and the shouting died and there was peace. 'But giggling college-girls condemned by the Instructor are far less distracting than meditators on holiday,' I added defiantly to myself.

The night meditation was not very good. I woke at 12, but fell asleep from 4 to 5.30. Perhaps the body had not coped with the problem of 'dukkha' quite as successfully as the mind!

After rice-gruel, some merchant ladies who had stayed the night came to bid me god-speed—or Dhamma-speed, I should say. They had a great deal of work to do in the markets, they told me. They could manage only about four hours' meditation at night—very little, of course, but they did the best they could—two hours before sleep and then again from 4 a.m. to 6 a.m.—they had to be at the markets by 7 a.m., they added apologetically. They had been meditating for five years. Their faces were serene and happy. Four hours a day! Should I manage four hours a day when I returned home, or would it be a case of 'You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!'? These ladies would have no servants; an elder child or a relative would look after the baby, or perhaps they would take it to the markets with them and put it in a cradle at the back of the stall.

The officers had extended a cordial invitation to join them in the Dhamma Hall on the Sunday afternoon when they came for

meditation. The afternoon commenced with a repetition of the initiation ceremonies and a short sermon. There were six men, all leading people from the Civil Service. Two experienced women meditators also came and I was placed between them. Once again the curtain was drawn between males and females. Only three hours passed, when the judge put his head over the curtain and said it was over, the curtain was drawn, the universal cigars and cigarettes were lit, and discussion followed—on the Dhamma, let us hope! However, here was someone who could translate the initiation ceremony, and pen and ink were brought. I later found that it was not exactly a translation and that in the endeavour to make fundamental tenets of Buddhism clear, the simplicity of the technique was not emphasized. That was the way with almost all translators except Sarana.

The distraction of Independence Day and the session with the officers being over, meditation proceeded normally. U Thein now advised switching over to contemplation of phyit-pyet on the heart only. This proved easy, and if concentration slackened it was found possible to restore it by inducing greater speed. U Thein was surprised that there was still no physical pain. I suggested that I had had my share of dukkha when meditating as a hermit in the Himalayas. He let it go at that. But the very next day proved my theory wrong. There were violent stabs of pain like red-hot needles and always, it seemed, on the tenderest parts of the anatomy. They got worse and worse. They recalled Mara's assaults on the Buddha the night he attained enlightenment. I did not dare to move lest they should stop before they departed naturally, and repeated almost aloud and almost violently 'phyit-pyet', taking deep breaths to make the pain bearable. A stimulant to greater effort was how U Thein had explained them. Right, more effort there should be and the 'phyit-pyet' flowed fast and furious; one would hardly have called it successful meditation, but it was certainly vigorous. The javelin thrusts were interspersed with worms tickling almost unbearably, but the pain was worse than the tickling. However, at last both the stabs and the worms got fewer and finally died away, and I turned to contemplate with greater equanimity the phyit-pyet on the heart.

As I looked mentally the heart turned into a whirling top, faster, faster, faster! It seemed to be drawing the rest of the body into it. I looked on fascinated. Then all of a sudden, without any warning, it disintegrated, leaving only a sea of atoms and a rather exhausted body floating at peace upon that sea. I do not know how long I lay, too enthralled to move. But the drama gradually ended and concentration became normal again.

U Thein was delighted. A little more pain, I thought, and his pleasure would be complete. And that night in fact brought what he hoped. I woke about 1 a.m. with the feeling I had been meditating instead of sleeping, and a pain round the heart which was only just bearable. The story of Christ on the Cross came into mind and gathered a meaning not understood before. However, the body was relaxed and remained like that for about three hours, when there came the dream I always get when a little bit more of the ego is being chipped off. I did not get up at the 4 a.m. bell, but waited until the pain had completely subsided about 5.30, when I did the usual yoga exercises.

U Thein was now completely confident. Something of the asavas, the basic tendencies with which we are born, is discarded with each step. But there is especial danger if one lingers at the second step, this first glimpse of anatta in actual experience. It is the danger of getting proud and conceited. He himself had experienced this danger.

The day after this, the processes of elimination started working again smoothly as if they had never stopped, and I saw that U Thein had been right in advising against purgatives (which, incidentally, do not form part of my first-aid kit). Meditation proceeded peacefully, and once again the heart became dissolved in that sea of atoms, or waves of creation and destruction. Then imaginary worms became little troublesome and I began to hope Mara and his red-hot needles would not return, until I remembered that the brain was now dissolved and that there was no 'I' to have either hope or fear.

That evening U Thein's last doubts were removed. The real work, he said, now commenced—I thought it had commenced after the Vipassana ceremony, but it was clear what he meant. The aim now was to consolidate from day to day the experience

obtained. To this end a third ceremony took place before the imageless Buddha shrine on Daw Nyunt's verandah. The purpose was to take a vow to renew from hour to hour the experience of anatta. Meditation for less than an hour would not be long enough.

As we were conferring that evening, the precocious monk referred to broke in upon our interview. U Thein paid respect to him and we followed his example. The monk had reached a further stage. He was most excited and wanted to tell U Thein about it at once. After he left, U Thein remarked, 'Very precocious that monk, he got the red-hot needles after only a week.' It had taken me three!

The next few days were not as successful as those that had gone. U Thein had expected the trance-state would follow, and warned of the danger of remaining in it for longer than a week. He need not have worried; it did not show the least sign of coming. On reading through the journal of this period after the second visit to Maha Bodhi two years later, I saw that unconsciously I had now made the mistake of returning to the theme of Christmas Day, that of being merged in waves of creation and creation and destruction. This was pleasant, but not vigorous enough, for speed is the essence of those atoms of which all things are composed. The only good symptom was a curious constriction of the abdomen, as if life were being pressed out, but it never developed.

It was the third last day, the twenty-sixth after arrival, that I developed bad pains as I sat cross-legged. They were bravely borne and by the end of the hour had disappeared. Then came a wonderful vision of perfect peace seen through the third eye. It seemed to be foretaste of the Deathless.

That night about midnight the body developed agonizing pains at every point it touched the floor. (No wonder, the Westerner will say, thinking of his own comfortable bed, but the bamboo mat had not conjured up such pains before, nor did it do so after!) I dared not move, for if I did the pain would go, and that would mean it would have to be faced all over again some other time. The present opportunity for progress must not be wasted, even though I perished, but the pain was excruciating.

The phyit-pyet formula that had served so well, now seemed meaningless. In the midst of the torture I developed a new mantra of my own which seemed to give some meaning to the pain, ‘Joy and pain are illusion (Maya), but the spirit can rise above both and find the Deathless.’ I repeated it thousands of times, over and over again very quickly. But it was about three hours before the pain abated, to be followed by the peace of relaxation when the formula had to be used in the opposite way to prevent attachment to the delicious ease.

Instead of congratulating on pains nobly borne, U Thein was not altogether pleased with the change of formula. Nor was he pleased when I told him of the vision through the third eye of perfect peace. This was a distraction like stopping at those pleasant picnic places instead of proceeding up the mountain. There was once a nun who could do this, and used to sit peacefully in premature trance state instead of facing the fact of dukkha and overcoming it.

During these last days there was another distraction in the form of a visit to Daw Nyunt’s family for lunch. The wealthy merchant in juggery, U Sein Maung, and his wife and daughter Minnie, acquired merit by driving us there in his new American car with the drive on the left and no attempt to give traffic signals on the right. As a lawyer, rather too much versed in motor car accident cases, my heart was several times in my mouth, but nothing happened—U Sein Maung worshipped the Buddha instead of the Goddess of Speed. I sat behind his wife. Considering the swarms of bandits and rebels said to be at large, I marvelled to note that her hair was held up by a solid gold comb.

We drove along the dusty, unpaved roads and under giant shady tamarind trees which in the piercing heat of summer must surely be among ‘the greatest blessings’ which the Buddhist scriptures have omitted to record. We stopped at one of the large but unpretentious houses under the shady tamarinds, the homes of wealthy merchants. The only palatial and pretentious buildings are the phongyi-khaungs, which you could distinguish anywhere even without their fretwork eaves. We did not have to

remove our sandals on entering the concrete ground-floor, for there was no Buddha shrine, but only ordinary European tables and chairs. A flight of wooden stairs led to the second storey with an iron grating to pull across so as to keep out the bandits—but it was I for once, not Sarana, who noted the significance of this protection. We removed our sandals at the foot of the stairs and entered the large carpeted upper room with the usual low tables one foot high and a huge double bed with corner posts for the mosquito-net. ‘Why do we think it strange that sleeping quarters should be in the dining room?’ I asked myself as I followed the others in, ‘paying respect’ to the Buddha shrine with its pretty semi-precious stones and fresh flowers and fruit placed in front.

The food on the ladies’ table was vegetarian in my honour, but the food on the men’s was not so pure. Minnie was far too shy to eat with us, and sat coyly as near to her father as etiquette permitted. After dinner I was presented with two triangular gong-bells, and everyone hoped they would be used to call the meditators when I returned to Australia.

For the tea and sweet course we had been invited to Daw Nyunt’s cousin’s house next door. This house was built on the same plan, and also Minnie’s, which we visited later. These wealthy people, who think nothing of giving hundreds, or even thousands of pounds to phongyi-khaungs and meditation centres, live very frugally themselves. When I managed to draw Minnie out of her shell and show she was not such a disgrace to her teachers as it at first seemed, she told me that her mother employed no servants, and that they even did their laundry, except large things like mosquito-nets. Of course, her parents were sparing nothing on her education, nor would they spare anything when it came to her travelling abroad after she got her University degree. She was their only child and obviously nothing was too good for her. But none the less she ironed her own longyis.

Minnie’s father ended the midday excursion by taking us inside the walls of the ancient city, repeating the 6 a.m. excursion of twenty years before. It had been sadly bombed in the meantime and little of it was left. It was now used as a

military encampment and usually the public was not admitted, but this was January 9 and an international holiday, and it had been thrown open. Desire of all sorts, even the desire to get back to the Meditation Centre, is the begetter of pain, and probably this was why I was unpleasantly conscious of the hypocrisy of monks who were buying things at holiday stalls, but using the hands of small boys to handle the money lest their own be guilty of breaking the tenth precept!

That night the body again developed the previous feeling of constriction of the abdomen, as if life were being pressed out of it, and a slight paralysis of the left leg. I did not mention these things to U Thein. From what I heard later he would have regarded them as good omens. But I was far more concerned with the disgracefully long time the body slept. This did not worry him at all. The body needed the extra rest because it had gone sight-seeing. What is over-sleeping and what under-sleeping is often a difficult point to determine. Probably most Westerners tend to one or other extreme—self-indulgence on the one hand, the sleeplessness due to nervous tension on the other. The happy wakefulness of the meditator is probably little known in the West. On the second visit to Maha Bodhi there was once the experience of waking up quite easily before the time planned for getting up. I took it for granted that it was due to anxiety lest the body oversleep. But U Thein was not so sure and bade me wait and see what happened the next night. This night the same thing happened but was succeeded by three hours of the bliss of samadhi. It was what he had expected. 'The previous night the wakefulness had been due to the Dhamma trying to break through; this night It had succeeded,' was his explanation.

After the ordination of the young men of the Jewellers' Guild, the new monks settled in to meditate like other yogis-in-training. A benefactor had provided the wherewithal for their food, so they did not have the hardship of going to the village barefoot for alms, as is customary for monks. Nonetheless, about the third day one of them found even a meditator's life too arduous, took off his yellow robes without telling anyone and departed. His

place was almost immediately taken by the precocious monk previously referred to, so that there were still four orange robes to whom to pay respect in the dining shed. After lunch they would go over to one of the cottages to partake of the after-lunch delicacies donated to them, such as pickled tea, fruit and sweetmeats. They sat on the verandah under the Buddha shrine. They seemed a class apart. Would it be possible to have an ordinary conversation with them as with U Aye Bo or U Thein? How could one have an ordinary conversation with people of the highest caste?

Another benefactor had provided these important people with a young woman to look after their comfort, though it was hard to see what she would find to do. It turned out that she had a natural aptitude for meditation. At once the old lady who served out the rice-gruel at breakfast, provided the wherewithal for her food so that she could devote her full time to meditation. No one who could benefit from meditation was prevented for lack of money; someone always provided the means. All were welcome at Maha Bodhi, and those of high and low degree were treated as equals, if they wished to learn to meditate.

CHAPTER SIX

OTHER MEDITATION CENTRES

The meditation movement in Burma is a post-war growth. That is not to say meditation was not practised before. Indeed, it was probably practised from the time the teaching of the Buddha first spread to Burma, which may well have been during his life, for there was trade intercourse between Burma and India since the pre-Buddha days of the Mahabharata. Although meditation was mainly practised by monks, it was also not unknown to lay people. But the sudden springing up of centres mainly for laymen and laywomen dates only from the Japanese occupation. U Aye Bo described it thus:

'In British days, Buddhism was good. Every village had its phongyi-khaung (or monastery) and in the towns there were very many. When you saw the yellow robe of a monk or a nun, you felt cool. You couldn't do bad things.' But during the Japanese occupation this type of vicarious redemption proved inadequate. Many monks took off the yellow robes. But also times were bad. People were forced into evil. They took to drink, black-marketing, and all sorts of dishonesty, trickery and immorality to get the money that would buy what they wanted. The Sangha, which had been an integral part of Burmese life from time immemorial, was not strong enough to be a refuge and a guard against the moral degradation which inevitably accompanies war.

When the Japanese had withdrawn and Burma achieved self-government, the more thoughtful of the wealthier citizens took stock of the situation and with a sinking heart realized the depths to which they had fallen. The Sangha, to look at one of whose members had made them feel 'cool', was not enough. They must learn how to become 'cool' in their own hearts, and the practice

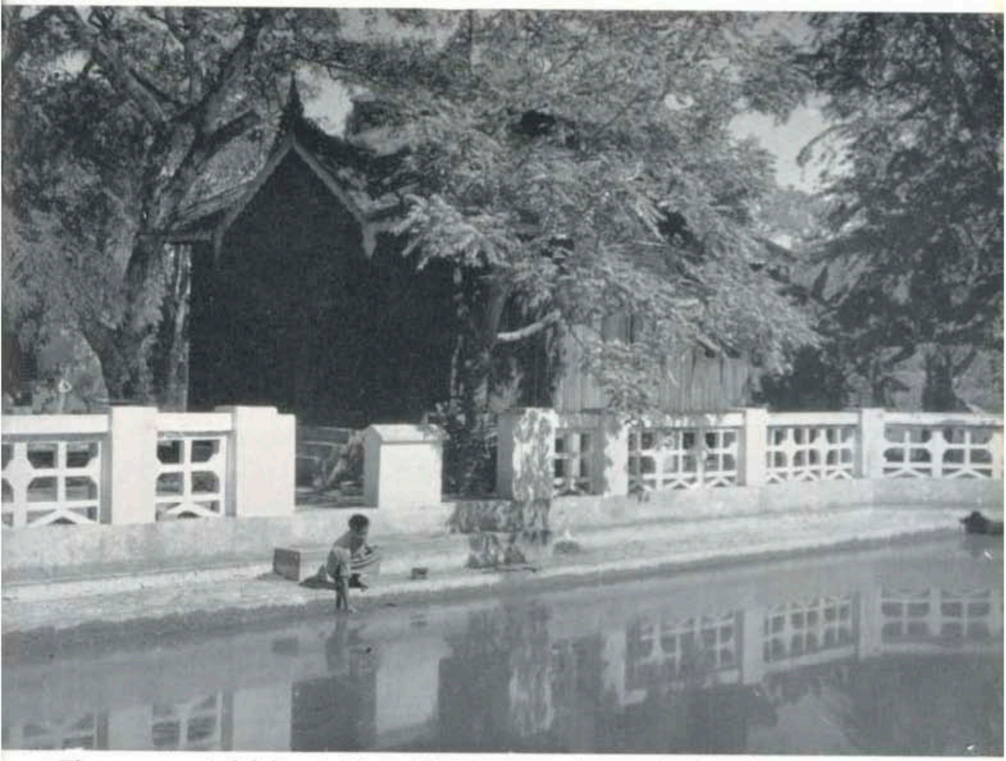
of meditation, the stilling of the thoughts, was the way. And so they subscribed the necessary funds and set up meditation centres. U Aye Bo's sister and Daw Nyunt had been among those who sponsored Maha Bodhi Centre. U Aye Bo himself had sponsored the Centre under Mandalay Pagoda Hill. U Nu, the then Prime Minister, lent the new movement every encouragement and all recognized centres received a small government subsidy. Naturally, almost all instructors were monks, but there is nothing to prevent a lay man or even a lay woman or a nun from being an instructor, for through meditation you come to know in actual experience that there is no reality in either man or woman, monk or nun, but only waves of ceaseless creation and destruction. This discovery is the essence of Vipassana meditation. I was told by more than one person that meditators were respected more than teachers of the Dhamma, because it is well-known that far more work and effort are needed to become a meditator.

That the meditation movement was the coming movement in Burma no one doubted. But how long it would last was another matter. U Aye Bo said they were planning for only twenty years. It was a new fashion strong for the moment, but they hardly expected it would be sought for by young students eager for the materialistic knowledge of the West and ignorant both of the degradation caused by the war or the golden age of Buddhism that preceded it. Time alone will show whether their pessimism is justified. But it may be mentioned in passing that many people have predicted that the only possible development for humanity must come through contacting what is Beyond Intellect. If this is so, growth of meditation practice may be expected and the Burmese movement may well be a straw in the wind showing a growing tendency.

How many meditation centres there are in Burma, it would be difficult to say. Around Mandalay there were then five large ones and many smaller ones. In addition, monks would come to the centres, learn meditation and return to their own villages to act as instructors. Further, there were numerous small nunneries where two or three nuns lived together for mutual aid, and while



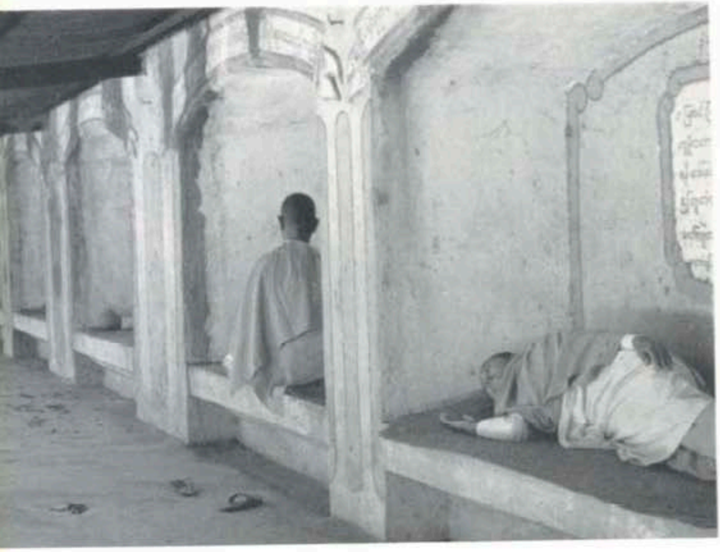
The author's meditation hut at Maha Bodhi, built over the water for coolness



The ornamental lake at Maha Bodhi, formerly a prince's pleasure garden



Dinner at the 'Hermitage'. This is the usual style of dining



Meditation 'caves' at Mohnyin. Each 'cave' is provided with a concrete pillow



A nun sitting for an examination in the Buddhist Scripture. These have been open to women since Burma obtained independence

(photo: U Aye Bo)

most of these were principally interested in the study of the 'Abhidhamma', a few practised meditation.

Each centre adopts its own method of meditation at the commencement. In the 'Abhidhamma', forty classical subjects are listed and the list is by no means exhaustive. But whatever method is used to gather in diffuseness of thought, in the end the meditator is expected to find in actual experience that the basic constituents of the universe are Dukkha (suffering), Anicca (impermanence) and Anatta (without permanent individual sell). That is the object of Vipassana insight or higher wisdom meditation. Intellectual knowledge of these matters does not assist one to find them in actual experience and the unlearned and ignorant peasant may find them sooner than the learned lecturer in 'Abhidhamma'. I was told that at the Maha Bodhi Centre the method had been successfully followed by poor villagers and even children.

The last week in Mandalay had been reserved for seeing something of other meditation centres. Ever since the Shan party had taken Daw Nyunt and Sarana to Mohnyin with its centre which practised the loving kindness method, there had been a strong urge to go there. But it meant six hours' journey, and apparently there was no upper class on the trains and no means of getting proper food on the way, and U Aye Bo would not hear of it. It was in vain that I told him of extremely uncomfortable journeys, including one only four years before in India, of six hours with twenty-four people in a compartment designed for eight. He suggested instead a vegetarian centre across the Irrawaddy River in the Sagaing Hills whose tops are crowned with white and gold pagodas.

After the return to Australia I found out that for a Buddhist to go to the Sagaing Hills is something like a Moslem going to Mecca, and when I casually mentioned to an Australian Buddhist who had been in Burma that I had stayed there, I could almost feel the halo growing round my head.

As it happened it was not the merchant, U Sein Maung, who acquired merit by driving Sarana and me to Sagaing, but the very modern son-in-law of U Aye Bo's sister, who had declared that the yellow robe was superior to all. He arrived before we had

barely finished rice-gruel at 6.30 a.m., and was a little impatient because I only just succeeded in bundling up my bedding and toothbrush in time to be off at the appointed hour of 7 a.m.!

The road took us across the bridge over the broad Irrawaddy River with the opal misted light of dawn lighting up the white and gold pagodas on the sacred Sagaing Hills. The river banks were partly exposed, for the rains had long since gone. Soon their soils, fertilized free of charge by the flood waters, would be planted with rice. Near the farther banks were rafts of teak-logs with little bamboo cottages built upon them for the workers who were floating them down to Rangoon. At Sagaing village just beyond the bridge, the monks were coming and going with their huge black bowls for collecting alms, and occasionally some little white-robed novices with them. Among the orange-robed ones were two nuns with their paler apricot-pink robes and huge bundles of foodstuffs on their heads. They were returning from getting supplies from their home villages. In the Buddha's day the life of the monk and the nun was very similar. But in Burma today the life of the one has little resemblance to that of the other. The nun is not a member of the official Order or Sangha. It is said that the order of nun members of the Sangha died out and that they can therefore never again become members of it, for according to the Vinaya Rules a nun must be ordained by both a monk and a nun. The Buddha is said to have stated that after he died the Order might abolish the lesser and minor precepts. Therefore there is no reason whatever, even from the point of view of strict orthodoxy, as to why this particular rule might not be altered. But Dr Soni later told me that any attempt to alter this Rule did not meet with any favour by the monks.

Not being members of the Sangha, the nuns are therefore far freer if they choose to take advantage of their freedom, but they do not seem to realize this and strict rules govern their lives according to custom. Their dress, for example, demands a high neck and tight sleeves, most unsuitable for a hot climate. They handle money, and may even have bank accounts. They may trade in the goods supplied by their village relatives and friends. The monks go out each morning to beg for alms and return with ready-cooked food, for the Vinaya forbids them to do their own

cooking. But custom decrees that nuns may go for alms only twice a week (with trays on their heads) and what is given to them is uncooked food, requisites like soup and candles and also money. But sometimes, as in Sarana's case, they have relatives who support them, so that the bi-weekly begging is not necessary. When a man is ordained he must have someone to act as a sponsor and care for him in time of need. A nun need not have a sponsor and partly because of this and partly because people do not think much merit attaches to giving to nuns, they usually live together in twos or threes so as to care for each other. Their dwellings are small and unpretentious, sometimes built by their own savings and sometimes erected by relatives. The monks, on the other hand, usually live in large monasteries, which are conspicuous by the wealth lavished upon them by lay benefactors. The work which both monks and nuns alike will perform consists of studying Holy Writ, meditating and teaching—the tuition being confined to Burmese reading and writing and, in the higher grades, the study of Pali. They also both offer hospitality to travellers; in the case of the monks, the cooking for such will be attended to by boy novices; in the case of the nuns, they do it themselves. Neither monks nor nuns appear to have felt the call to go among the bandits and rebels—as Punna in the Buddha's day went among the fierce Sunaparanti (who may have been the ancestors of the Burmese)—to teach them the Master's message of loving kindness and peace.

Our businesslike young driver dropped us at Sagaing, one of the ancient capitals of Burma, but now little more than a large village. Around it were many pagodas falling into ruin. You may not use the stones of an old pagoda to build a new one. You may repair it, it is true, but there is more merit in building a completely new one, so the new ones stand forth boldly in gleaming white and gold among the crumbling ruins of the old. There were several lovely pairs of Crested lions which mean 'sandals off', for they mark the entrance to holy ground, either a pagoda or a phongyi-khuang.

Sarana told the story of the Crested Lions:

‘Once upon a time a Princess was driven into exile and in the forest, mated with a Lion. They had two children, a boy and a girl. When the boy grew up and heard about his mother’s high parentage, he decided to take her and his sister back to their rightful home. The Lion, his father, was heartbroken when he saw them departing and softly followed after them, his great tears falling to the ground. When the son saw his father following he was very angry, raised his bow and shot his father. The Lion suffused his wicked son with loving kindness and the arrow dropped away harmless. The son, angrier than ever, raised his bow again, but again the same thing happened and the arrow fell away harmless. But the Lion was not yet a saint, and when the son raised his bow a third time, the Lion got angry, too, and this time the arrow did not drop away harmless. It pierced his heart and the Lion fell dead. The son was filled with remorse for the frightful deed he had done, and when he returned to his mother’s home and became King, he strove to expiate his crime of partricide by building statues at every sacred place to commemorate his father. These lions are not like ordinary lions for they have a crest, but the Lion who was the father of the King was not an ordinary lion, either.’

At Sagaing township we bade farewell to our driver, gave our little luggage to a girl who carried it down to the river where Sarana arranged a boat and also the proper fee to pay both the girl and the boatman. How easy it is to travel through a foreign country when with someone who speaks the language! I still failed to see how there could have been any difficulty about the journey to the Loving-Kindness Centre with Sarana as my companion.

We had only a short way to go upstream, but the current was very strong and sometimes we seemed hardly to move forward at all. Lordly phongyi-khaungs rose above us from the banks of the river, snow-white in the morning sun, and their orange-robed inhabitants were washing their huge black bowls at the end of little piers built out into the river. Nearby, paler-robed nuns were also doing their washing-up, but standing in the mud! ‘There is great merit in giving to the phongyis,’ said Sarana, without the

least trace of bitterness in her voice. 'Ten kyats are given to a monk when only one will be given to a nun. It is our Burmese custom.' At the landing place was a humble bamboo cottage of a small nunnery.

The boatman paid off, a girl, presumably his daughter, put our bedding on her head and we went up the paved track to the nunnery. It was covered with a roof rising tier upon tier, made of abominable corrugated iron 'which is so much more lasting than bamboo', everyone explained.

The nunnery turned out to be a small village in a narrow valley rising in terrace above terrace with a narrow cobbled street down the centre. All was very clean and tidy. Firewood was piled in neat heaps beside the cottages. There were no lions guarding the unpretentious entrance, and no need to remove shoes. Inside the entrance at the lower end was a properly hygienic deep-pit latrine, so deep that it would have been quite impossible to retrieve any valuable that fell into it. We were taken to the house of the elder nun, but she was listening to a Dhamma talk from the monk who presided over both the monastery and the nunnery. There was the usual charming Buddha shrine and polished teak floor. There was also my usual plea to have the furthest-off hut. This was one of the meditation huts outside the compound gate which was securely locked at 6 p.m. But Sarana had no sympathy whatever with my desire to sleep among the leopards as I had done in India. This was not India; this was Burma and there was a rebel village the other side of the Sagaing Hills, and bandits had robbed the monks of their carpets only a month before—I might have retorted that surely this was a karmic outcome of monks having carpets in the first instance; for these are not among the four requisites of monks laid down by the Buddha—tree roots for lodgings, scraps for food, rags for robes and ammonia for medicine. However, 'when in Rome do as the Romans do' and when I was offered the topmost cottage with only a wall between me and the jungle of giant frangipani trees, this seemed a good second best to a hut among the leopards.

The elder nun was still listening to the sermon when this negotiation was concluded and it was suggested that perhaps I

might go and listen also. The audience hall was a building with fretwork on the roof like a phongyi-khaung; indeed it was so palatial it was hard to believe it did not belong to monks. The small audience of nuns was crouching on the floor with their heads resting on their hands held prayer fashion with the little fingers on the floor. ‘A strange posture in which to listen to a sermon,’ I said to myself. However, I slid down on to the floor as gracefully as I could without letting the handbag and camera go ‘plonk-plonk’ and assumed the same posture. Of course, I understood not a word, but I could meditate. ‘Curious posture in which to meditate,’ I said to myself, ‘and not among the four prescribed postures on the notice-board at the entrance to the Maha Bodhi Centre. However ! —Mind and body only fleeting shadows on a wind-swept sea!’ I had repeated my latest formula for anicca mentally many hundreds of times—how many times could it be repeated in the space of about forty-five minutes ?—when I heard the old monk say something about ‘Dukkha’ (pain). The body was becoming unpleasantly and closely associated with Dukkha by this time, and I ventured a sideways glance out of the corner of my right eye. Sarana was sitting up with her hands in the attitude of prayer, and so, too, I noticed, were several of the others. I followed their example, but I was not altogether sure that sitting with the hands prayerwise under the chin and nothing on which to rest the elbows might not produce even more dukkha. And that it turned out later was precisely the case—the nuns had merely fallen forward to ease the strain. When I came in and did the same they had alternated between mirth at my ridiculous posture and pity for my unfortunate bones. The sermon continued. I now noticed that the old monk was sitting cross-legged on a comfortably padded chair. I also saw that the walls were hung with charts designed for an elementary physiology class. This was obviously a centre where they chose the thirty-two different parts of the body as the theme for meditation. In the middle of the hall was the inevitable towel among the silken folds of the curtain to be drawn to screen monks from nuns. The Burmese seemed to use towels for everything, but especially in lieu of shawls.

The sermon did at length end. After all it had to do so, for did not the Buddha teach that all things that have a beginning must also have an ending! The monk got down from his softly padded chair and went on to the verandah, and we followed him dutifully 'paying respect' before sitting on the spotlessly polished teak floor. My unfortunate karma placed me in the sunniest spot with the fierce 10 a.m. sun streaming on to my hatless head—'Dukkha— mind and body only fleeting shadows on a wind-swept sea,' I breathed to myself, while I was being explained to the spiritual head of the community. I then asked Sarana to question him about his method of meditation. He said that the student meditates on the thirty-two different parts of the body until he sees them as X-ray shows them; then they fade away and only the skeleton remains; and that in turn crumbles to dust, and so by a different route you come to 'phyit-pyet', creation and destruction—mind and body only as fleeting shadows on a wind-swept sea. This was also a Vipassana meditation centre like ours, that is to say, it aimed at finding anatta, selflessness, or the highest wisdom in actual experience. I then asked if any other Europeans had been here. A Frenchman had once come, and also a German, but the latter wore the yellow robes. I was the first woman, and I was welcome to stay as long as I liked and practice either this system of meditation or the one learned at Maha Bodhi. I said that as I was staying for only two days I would keep to the one already learned. But I knew, too, that physiology would not have been an easy way for me.

Lunch was the next procedure. Kind U Aye Bo had arranged that my own cook should prepare the food for the first meal so that it should contain no chillies; and the ready-prepared meal had been carried by Sarana in a treble-decker aluminium container. We sat on bamboo mats on the polished floor under the Buddha shrine of the elder nun's room. I had expected to be required to 'pay respect' to her as to monks, but she was only an elder nun, Sayagyi, and her position carried none of the authority of a Mother Superior of a Convent, let alone a woman general of the Salvation Army which knows no sex distinction. The nunnery was completely under the control and supervision of the

monastery on the hill above. My cottage, which belonged to a nun who had gone to her own village for supplies, looked straight over to the lordly phongyi-khaung. It looked over to many others also, for almost all the buildings on these hills are either phongyi-khaungs, pagodas or nunneries, except in the village at the foot on the river whose inhabitants are boatmen and carriers.

My cottage, of course, contained the usual little Buddha shrine, just as a devout Catholic's would contain a large crucifix and I sat down to meditate before it.

The only period of the day at this centre when there was silence was between 12 noon and 3 p.m. But even during this time the first two hours were spent by the young girl-nuns in doing written homework, for they were learning Pali. The only compulsory hour for meditation was between 2 and 3 p.m. when all gathered in the Dhamma Hall for community meditation. The curtain was drawn across the Buddha shrine with its typically Burmese pretty-pretty hanging draperies, and a monk walked in and sat behind it. The girl-nuns of fourteen or fifteen tended to be fidgety. There was none of the concentrated peace of meditation in the Maha Bodhi Dhamma Hall. When the hour ended the monk rang a bell, called the roll, got up and departed, and then all the nuns, old as well as young, seemed to relax—as school children do when the teacher leaves the room. But the autocracy of the orange robe was affecting my camera sense and when I tried to take a picture of the interior, the stops got jammed and shortly after the camera went on strike altogether.

It was an interesting community. About eighty nuns lived together in small groups each independent of the other, and mostly devoting their time to meditation—so I was told! It was certainly officially a Vipassana meditation centre and any student who wished to sit for examinations in the Pali Scriptures must do so from some other centre. But the dominant impression left was that of young girl novices ceaselessly droning their lessons aloud with their noses nearly on the floor, while in the phongyi-khaung above, little boys were apparently doing the same—also doubtless with their noses nearly on the floor.

When the light failed after sunset, the droning ceased and in its place there was the chug-chug of the petrol pump which drew the water from the river. Then that, too, ceased, and peace hung above the little valley; stars came out and also green fluorescent lights on the pagodas poised above the surrounding hills. One could sink quietly into meditation and know with inner sight that we are one with the changing ocean of creation and destruction and that there is neither monk nor nun, nor man, nor woman. Then a sudden screech would break the silence as a leopard pounced upon his prey; another screech and all was over. There were no starved or diseased dogs in the Sagaing Hills; the leopards saw to that.

Below my cottage was the ruin of another which the nun-owner could not afford to replace. When white ants get into a building, you may not destroy them, for that would be taking life, so you may not repair the building. It must just decay away and the owner must wait until there is money to build a new one. I could look over the low wall from my windows and see the pilgrims from far-off places climbing the hills to visit the pagodas. I could also see the little squirrels scampering up the trees and the gaudy wild cocks resembling bantams flying among the feathery tamarinds, the semi-leafless trees and the frangipanis, bare of leaves but from which still sprang a few lingering fragrant blooms, blooms which when fried with oil and salt make a tasty dainty dish. There are many things in the jungle that can be eaten; next day we saw a nun gathering some of them for her lunch.

Next day, too, we watched the monks from the monastery above coming to get food from the nuns. Bamboo mats were laid down for them to tread upon, and the older nuns stood ready for their arrival with large containers of rice—others carried the curries on their heads up the steep hill to the phongyi-khaung. Only elder nuns may serve monks. All women are unclean, but the young ones who have not passed the menopause, must never taint the food by handing it to a monk if it can possibly be avoided. There was, however, no objection to the rice having been carried on the heads in heavy sacks by women of any age from villages a long distance away. Does the Western reader feel

indignant that able-bodied monks should expect to be carried for, cooked for and given food by weaker women who would get only one kyat for every ten kyats given to them? The nuns did not feel aggrieved. Their faces were beautiful with inner peace and love for all, and there was an atmosphere of happiness and joy you would travel far to find in the West.

After the monks had collected their food with downcast eyes—all except the young ones and boy-novices who could not resist looking furtively at the strange white woman, Sarana and another nun and I went to take photographs of the pagodas on the hilltops—the film which did not catch, so that the photos were never taken. On the way were several tea-shops for weary pilgrims, and stalls for them to purchase flowers as offerings at the Buddha shrines. At one stall, gold leaf was being sold for affixing to a giant Buddha statue and a man was standing on the folded arms of the Blessed One while he did so. I rather fancied a photo of myself fixing gold leaf, but was told women were unclean and might not stand on Buddha statues; they must get a man to fix the gold leaf for them. My enthusiasm cooled. A little further on there were statues of some prehistoric or mythological animals. I asked Sarana to pose for a photo in an artistically chosen spot, but mythological beasts also objected to the unclean sex!

The uncleanness of my sex was becoming depressing. But the Irrawaddy River lay calm and peaceful in the opal light of morning and the white and gold pagodas rose peacefully from the hilltops and the rows of Buddha statues sat in the serene peace of Samadhi. The Buddha had not despised women. But what did it all matter? In meditation everyone became merged in those waves of ceaseless change. In meditation one knew of oneself that there was neither clean nor unclean.

While we were away the nuns had gone down to the river to bathe. It was a long walk and they went only every other day. Like the lay people, monks and nuns would tuck their longyis under their shoulders, and having washed slip the dry one over the wet one and slip the wet one off. I could not have done that anyhow and it was fortunate that there was a cottage of a lay supporter just outside the nunnery and it had a bathroom with a

door. Near to it was a meditation cave, a natural cave in the limestone with a cement stairway leading down and cement floor. Some people prefer to meditate in caves rather than in huts. Apparently snakes do also, for U Thein had once been meditating in a cave when a snake flashed across and he hastily had to duck his head to give it free passage.

That afternoon we went up the hill to the large pagoda and phongyi-khaung which had long ago been badly damaged by an earthquake. Nearly every second pagoda seemed to be having some repairs done to it, but this one had parts of it literally draped in bamboo-matting. The contractor who was attending to the rebuilding had been to an English school and worked with the British. He had been away in Rangoon when the earthquake happened and when the roof of his cottage had fallen on his bed. Being sacred ground of course everyone had to go barefoot, including the workmen who were doing the repairs. The contractor was very pleased about the invention of corrugated iron and was in the process of spoiling the beauty of the building by replacing its many diverse roofs with this—to my prejudiced eyes—hideous material, which is forbidden as the roof of any modern house in my country.

The Sagaing Hills with their crests crowned with pagodas and their sides sprinkled with phongyi-khaungs and sacred shrines, are very beautiful, and beautiful also the tranquil waters of the river flowing at their feet, and there was a wonderful atmosphere of loving kindness among that community of gentle nuns. But the vegetarian Vipassana meditation centre is not the best of places for you when you had a mother who used to walk in suffragette processions and when you yourself pioneered the path for women in the legal profession and helped to inaugurate legislation giving equal rights of guardianship to mothers! On the other band, the very object of meditation is to rise above the pairs of opposites—the congenial and uncongenial, the pleasant and the unpleasant. So in a sense perhaps the Vegetarian Meditation Centre might be the very best of places for such a one.

The boat slipped easily down the river current on the return, quickly passing the lordly phongyi-khaungs and the humble bamboo cottages of tiny nunneries, and the orange-robed monks and the apricot-pink-robed nuns washing themselves and their clothes, the nuns standing on the muddy banks and the monks on carefully constructed little piers.

A pilgrim party arrived at Sagaing in crowded buses just as we left. They were dressed in strange navy blue garments, far too hot for this climate; they probably came from the hill country. We were to see them two days later returning; and we noticed that most of them had then taken off their upper garments, but even so looked uncomfortably hot as they sat crowded in the bus.

Oh! It was good to be back at the Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre, where sex did not seem to matter so much, and where monks and nuns and lay men and lay women were considered equally capable of realizing the truth of anatta, that there is in reality no permanent individual self, either male or female, ordained or non-ordained.

Beyond the patchwork of the rice fields at the back of the Centre, one could imagine rather than see, St John's Catholic Hospital for Lepers. Close to it was the Buddhist Leper Meditation Centre, the first on the schedule of the centres to be visited before leaving Mandalay. At 7 a.m. on the Sunday morning, U Thein led Daw Nyunt, Sarana and me at a brisk pace in a bee-line across the dew-wet borders and the stubble of the old rice-with a new crop coming up! We came to a quiet lake from which the early morning mist was rising. It was surrounded by charming bamboo cottages, paw-paws, bananas and African orange marigolds. A few yellow-robed ones completed the peaceful picture.

The Leper Meditation Centre was an offshoot of our own, but only in existence for two years. It was visited from time to time by U Thein, although it had an independent board of trustees and was supported by different benefactors whose names appeared at the entrance to a lovely, willow-pattern bridge. Those who lived at Maha Bodhi permanently, did so because they had found through meditation the gateway to transcend suffering and to

what Buddhists call the Griefless and the Deathless, and here exactly the same opportunity was being given to those who were permanently ill. In Western hospitals for the incurable we stimulate the senses with various entertainments, visual, aural, gustative and perhaps with books. But here the senses were taught to lie still so that the patient could learn to see his sick body as one with creation and destruction and like the healthy ones, find the Griefless and Deathless here and now.

Of course as a Westerner and a disciple of Gandhi, I should have liked to add a vegetable patch to the paw-paws and bananas, so that the Centre would be partly self-supporting as well as provide body-labour for the inhabitants. But then I should have liked to add that vegetable patch to the cottages of the permanent meditators at Maha Bodhi also. No one must judge the avocation of another, and with or without vegetable patch, this leper centre seemed to hold up the ideal of a hospital for incurables by teaching the patients how to still the senses instead of stimulating them.

A nun had been in charge of the meditation instruction at this Centre, but she was then in Rangoon, and her place had been taken by a novice monk, a novice only, because no one can receive full ordination if he has any serious disease. There were twenty-eight lepers in this little colony—sixteen novice monks, three nuns, a little yellow-robed boy and eight lay men and lay women. They had come there because they were Buddhists who did not like compulsory attendance at prayers at St Joseph's. 'Give where your heart inclines you,' said the Buddha to King Pasenadi. My heart inclined me to give to this Centre more than any other, and next day I went back again with my cook and his wife—the wife carrying the offering and walking behind her husband of course!

U Sein Maung, the merchant in juggery, the sugar made from toddy palms, with his daughter Minnie and his handsome new car was waiting for us when we got back. Unfortunately the necessity for getting the camera fixed wasted an hour and a half of our precious time while we scouted around on a Sunday to find U Aye Bo's cinema friend, U Thant, who kindly lent me his own as well as getting mine adjusted.

The second meditation centre on the schedule to be visited, was the large monastery, Zanaka's Gandhayone. Its sparkling white walls and glittering gold pagodas danced in the sunlight near the Irrawaddy River, and we arrived just in time to see a procession of orange-robed ones being fed by the laity.

Daw Nyunt and Sarana got our own lunch things out of the car and carried the heavy basket between them to the picnic area while our host walked sedately ahead. In Burma it is not dignified for a man to carry anything. I realized now why it had been a girl who carried our things to the vegetarian meditation centre. It is only in the markets that the coolies are men. I recalled, too, how on a previous visit I had asked an Englishman to hold my umbrella to shield the camera lens, and how he had thrust it back angrily saying, 'People will think I am your servant.' Sometimes when at home and no one is looking a man will help, but in public he prefers to pay someone else to do the carrying his wife cannot manage. Different countries, different ways! After all it is only a few years since our own men let their wives carry babies far beyond their strength sooner than shoulder such undignified burdens themselves.

The lunch things were placed on benches under shady trees as we do things in Australia, but here the trees were banyans and most of them were slowly strangling to death a palm tree around which a seedling had grown unnoticed. Sarana and I recalled how the Buddha had said that even so do small faults strangle the virtue of the one who neglects them. Monks washed their bowls at a nearby well, and one monk was shaving another. Several little white-robed novices shyly investigated the strange foreign lady; these little boys entered the Order for longer or shorter periods as they wished, and this period had nothing to do with the customary time during which they became monks, usually when their sisters undergo the ear-piercing ceremony.

After our lunch we went to pay our respects to the abbot or Sayadaw, bowing to the ground before him on the shining polished floor. The paintwork was in delicate pastel shades. Inside his room we could see bookshelves and a bed that looked suspiciously higher than the Vinaya Rules permit! He was a genial kindly man and graciously accepted one of the yellow

handkerchiefs I had had specially dyed before leaving home, and which ought to have been orange. But it turned out that this was not a meditation centre after all—few monasteries are. It was more like a Theological Training College for the monks who came, came to study the Pali Scriptures. So between camera and Theological College, the morning had gone with only the Leper Meditation Centre to our credit.

We got back into the car and next drew up before a corrugated iron gateway bearing the well-known 'Daw Daw' sign—there was no mistake this time. It was Utiloka To-Moung Talk. The grounds were crammed with meditation huts of bamboo. The Dhamma Hall, which was larger than ours, was crowded, five men and a litle boy in front, and the rest of the audience consisting of women, behind them. When we entered they were all breathing like a blacksmith's bellows. There was no doubt about it being some variation of the anapana method. The orange-robed one in charge, who chewed betel (instead of smoking cheroots!), seeing us, told his pupils to relax. We paid our respects and presented another yellow handkerchief and Sarana told him I had come to find out about his method. Instead of explaining it, he suggested I should try it for five minutes. I was told to draw in breath right down to the abdomen with great force, long, hard, deep. After about two minutes of this terrific strain I felt faint and gave up. He told me to change to 'phyit-pyet'. This was delightfully restful. The idea of this method is that you stir up the 'phyit-pyet' very quickly and very soon have practical experience of dukkha—I can vouch for the latter! Also, it is an easy method for getting quick concentration for there is no gap between the breaths in which the mind can wander. He conducted no second initiation ceremony into the stage of phyit-pyet—you found ceaseless change automatically by observing the changes in your own body. All this may be true, and perhaps the method may be suited to the physically robust and youthful with plenty of energy to be used up. But Sarana said it had been known to have the undesirable effect of sending young children into premature trance-state. It would surely be most unwise to attempt it except under an experienced instructor.

Once more we crossed the railway bridge over the Irrawaddy River. The next centre was that of the Elephant Pagoda, Hsin Mya Shin, near Sagaing. Just after we arrived the lay assistant instructor came in on his bicycle and we sat together on a low platform while he explained the method used here. It commenced with anapana, breathing, but with the mind centred on the gentle rise and fall of the abdomen as the breath went in and out—phyit-pyet. Mindfulness was the chief objective. If you wanted to sneeze you observed the fact and said to yourself, 'This body wants to sneeze.' If you had nothing in particular to observe, your mind must go back to the rise and fall of the abdomen—rather difficult for the fashionable Western woman who wears foundation garments, I thought to myself! From this you always came eventually to 'phyit-pyet', creation and destruction, for that is of the very nature of everything if you take the trouble to observe it. For example, you may look at green, turn away and see its after-image change to red.

There were sixty people in residence here—monks and nuns, and lay men and lay women—the men's quarters being very strictly segregated from the women's. After the talk with the lay instructor we paid our respects to the monk head instructor and out came another of the specially dyed yellow handkerchiefs. He left no special impression upon me, partly no doubt because we had another centre to 'do' before dark.

This last centre was the Sein Ban, beautiful and shady and, apart from the absence of the lake, even more attractive and far more peaceful than Maha Bodhi. Its method was the same as that of the Elephant Centre.

'Doing' meditation centres is far more fatiguing than meditating, and definitely a distraction. So next day, more especially as the camera had again gone wrong and again needed attention, I asked that we should visit only one, the Ku Tho Daw under Mandalay Hill. This was U Aye Bo's own special centre and very different from any of the others. It was situated in the midst of an extensive pagoda compound and the lovely trees were the shadiest I have seen anywhere in the world. The compound also contained a small forest of shrines each with a slab of stone graven with a page from the Buddhist Scriptures.



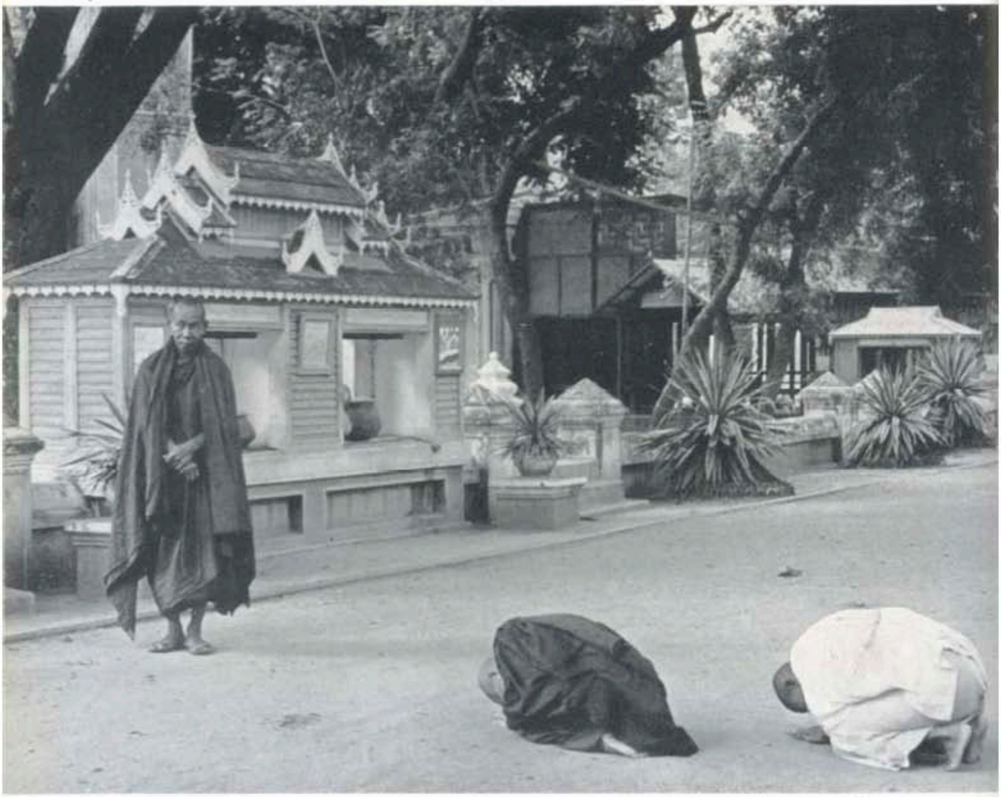
The inside of the Mohnyin Dhamma Hall, where each day the nuns from five to eighty years listened to two-hour sermons delivered by monks



Mohnyin, famous for its 500,000 buddhas. Most of these are tiny figures seated on Bodhi-tree leaves and giving the fretwork appearance shown in this picture. Around the bases of the columns are life-like statues of Nats and offerings of fruit



The effigy of the aged Sayadaw of Mohnyin. Beside the figure is a gilded coffin ready to take his remains to the funeral pyre



Nuns 'paying respect' to a monk. Monks are treated as living gods and there is great merit in giving them food and services

There were no cottages or huts. The meditators simply slept out on low platforms something like huge beds, one section for the men and one for the women. The nearby cook-shop provided the requisite meals for K3 (six shillings Australian, five shillings English) per day. It was the quietest and most secluded of any centre; its peace was disturbed only by an occasional student using one of the niches with the Sacred Writ as a kind of cubby house in which to study—or sleep!

The method used was also different, although it started with concentration on breathing as they nearly all did in one way or another. You then chose whichever organ of sense you found most important to you, eye, ear, nose, tongue, touch or thinking-organ, and concentrated on that. By doing so, you found that what you thought so supremely important was ceaselessly changing, and so once again you ended up with 'phyit-pyet'.

In all the centres the meditation commenced by 'taking refuge' and with the radiation of boundless love.

With the exception of the Red Dragon Meditation Centre, these were the chief ones around Mandalay. I did not go to the Red Dragon. It was said not to aspire to Vipassana, or higher insight wisdom, but only to concentration. Its chief interest lay in its being established and wholly subsidized by the lady who ran a highly successful business manufacturing cheroots which bore the trademark of a red dragon.

In addition to the large centres there were many smaller ones, but one can easily have a surfeit of anything, even meditation centres.

Above U Aye Bo's meditation centre, rose Mandalay Pagoda Hill, a granite batholith rising from the alluvial plain of the Irrawaddy, and the love and money of the citizens of Mandalay have built into it the story of the life, or more correctly, lives, of the Buddha, with two huge white lions guarding its entrance and the steep covered stairways which rise to its summit from the east, south, west and north, the tiered climb to the summit that had left a deep impression when I saw it as a tourist twenty years before.

The day before departure all had been arranged for Daw Toke Gale and Daw Nyunt to take me on the pilgrimage to the summit. But something went wrong with the arrangements, and Daw Nyunt and I found ourselves deposited at the feet of the Lions with no interpreter and only four phrases in common—'Phyit-pyet', 'Daw-Daw', 'Meditation' and 'Thank you very much'. As I was accustomed to travelling in foreign countries and unable to speak the language this did not seem alarming, especially as there was a spiritual bond between us. But apparently Daw Nyunt thought otherwise and went in quest of someone who could speak English, and lo and behold! although all the pilgrims were coming down and none were going up, we ran straight into a Technical College Lecturer and his young wife who were going the right way. He at once adopted me as his mother as Indian students used to do.

The story of the Buddha's life starts with his death on the ground floor and goes backwards as you go up. There is a pillared grove of alabaster sal trees and in their midst the giant figure of the Master with his feet to the south and his head to the north. As you mount through shrine after shrine you pass through various stories of his life until you come to the time he practised austerities, vainly seeking through self-torture to find the way to truth, and the figure in that shrine is little more than a ghastly skeleton. Then you see him leaving the palace to go into the forest, and a little further up taking a last look at his wife and sleeping child, and finally back to his birth in the pleasure garden of Lumbini. Then you start the stories of his previous lives as a man, and pass upwards to his previous lives as animals, including the well-known story of how, when he was a Banyan Deer he offered his life to save the life of a mother doe. Finally, crowning the hilltop, were statues of the four previous Buddhas who lived on earth before Gautama, who had been the Prince Siddhartha.

Huge iron girders have been carried up to the top of the hill to build these shrines, and one shuddered to think how many bags of cement. At each shrine as we mounted upwards we 'paid respect' to the Buddha statue, Daw Nyunt burned candles and said 'prayers', and I put a small coin in the offering box. I had a

lot of small change when I started and none at all at the top. Through the archways at the summit we looked down to the rectangular rice fields, the square of the moat surrounding the ancient city, and the square of U Aye Bo's meditation centre with its gleaming white pagodas among the cool green trees.

Of course we climbed the whole way barefoot. The young lecturer said he visited these pagodas at least once a month. He had learned the stories of the Buddha's life from his parents and he in turn would tell them to his own children. They are lovely stories, stories of loving kindness and self-sacrifice. If Burmese people are ever guilty of treachery and cruelty, they have less excuse than we who imbibed when we were children the often shockingly cruel and treacherous stories of the Old Testament.

Mandalay Pagoda had been climbed in the company of a devout and orthodox believer who sincerely thought there was merit in bowing three times before each shrine, burning candles and saying 'prayers', and yet Daw Nyunt was also a sincere and practised meditator who knew from her own experience that all things within this universe consist simply of ceaseless waves of creation and destruction. It was the meeting of the orthodox and the reformer in the one person. I was glad we could not talk. We understood each other from inner experience and words would have spoilt the understanding. The meditation movement in Burma is a reform movement springing up within orthodoxy as it had grown up within Daw Nyunt. No Martin Luther, or George Fox had arisen to denounce those who thought the Deathless and Griefless could be found by bowing before images and burning candles and chanting sacred runes. And so the orthodox and the reformers live happily side by side, new wine put successfully into old bottles.

On the way back we called at the young lecturer's lodging. He and his wife were eating Burmese rice while sitting on chairs at an ordinary Western table. 'Would you like to see my baby?' he asked excitedly—I notice that young fathers generally have a 'MY baby', never an 'OUR baby'! He went in and brought out the cutest little black-haired topsy, who made not the slightest protest at being taken from her dark cot into the brilliant fluorescent light. It was good to know she would learn from her

father's lips those lovely stories of the Buddha's life enshrined in Mandalay Pagoda Hill.

It was the last night.

'The Dhamma has brought you here, and the Dhamma will be your Teacher when you leave,' said U Thein. He had told all that might be of help, not only to me, but to enable me to help others in my country.

He warned of the danger of obtaining the trance-state prematurely before the realization of selflessness. Premature trance-state is only self-hypnotism; it comes easily to certain types of people including young children. He also warned of the danger of allowing personal affection to spring up for the Teacher. In order to break this incipient affection on the part of one of his male disciples, he had to pretend to get angry; the man was disgusted and departed, which was what U Thein had intended; it was the lesser evil that he should give up meditation. Western psychologists and Roman Catholics have noted the same danger, but I have not found it mentioned in any Eastern book concerning gurus. Personal affection, as distinct from universal love, is always a danger, even between friends, but far more between teacher and pupil. Gandhi's 'love letters' were for all alike.

A matter he emphasized was the need for faith, not necessarily faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Faith in loving kindness, for example, would serve as well. 'You will not expect people to become Buddhists in your own country before they practice Vipassana meditation. There is only one Dhamma.'

'I wish I could talk with him,' I said. She translated back, 'He wishes he could talk with you.'

And then he told me of the vow all instructors should take.

'I vow I shall show people how to meditate solely for the sake of loving-kindness. I shall not teach for money, nor for gain, nor out of fear for what will happen if I do not teach (that is to say, not because a government or military authority bids me),

not for my own benefit, not for power or fame, not for renown or for gaining praise.

If this vow is taken by the instructor and adhered to, it is said that there is no risk of any pupil of his taking the wrong path or going insane, as may well happen if the instructor teaches from any wrong motive. Even neurotic persons are said to be safe under his direction. The vow is tremendously exacting and one wonders how many who profess to teach meditation have truly taken it with their whole heart and mind, and live according to it. Unless they have truly taken this vow they may do much harm. And hence once again the need for an aspirant not to go in quest of a teacher, but to depend rather on the written word of saints unless and until the really trustworthy teacher crosses his path.

When all had been said that could be said, I distributed the last of my funds among various meditation centres, including Sarana's centre-to-be, and under Daw Nyunt's guidance rang the gong-bell to distribute the merit even as the vibrations of the bell flow away across the countryside. Then under Sarana's direction I bowed to the Instructor and asked his pardon for any wrongs I had committed and any misunderstandings that had arisen. He in his turn then bowed to me, and similarly asked my pardon. 'It is our Burmese custom as between teachers and pupils and as between parents and children,' said Sarana. 'It prevents unkindness from lasting very long.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIVING GODS

Plane travelling had speeded up preposterously in the two years that elapsed before the next visit to Burma, and now there was a direct service to Rangoon. Within twenty-four hours of leaving my little cottage I was at Mandalay and that allowed for a four-hour wait in Rangoon. Once again the extraordinary kindness of Burmese people overwhelmed me. The Air Hostess at Rangoon even paid the Ks2 required by Burma Airways when it was found not possible to change travellers' cheques at 6 a.m.

The conductor on the Mandalay plane handed me the morning paper. I read that the 'Stable' party led by U Ba Swe was asserting that if the 'Clean' party led by U Nu were elected, and Buddhism made the State religion, all people would be forced to worship the phongyis. That was to be the keynote of the rather painful drama of the next weeks, for I soon saw that whether U Nu wanted it or not, the vast majority would continue to fall on their faces before the orange-robed monk, and regard service to monks as service to gods.

At the first village to which the plane dropped down there was the white pagoda crowning a little hill, beside it the phongyi-khaung with two or three orange-robed ones strolling about, and below it the little village of bamboo cottages and shady trees. And that was the pattern of all the villages over which we flew—a cluster of trees partly hiding the cottages, the white spire of the pagoda sometimes capped with gold, and the large phongyi-khaung. The pattern has not altered since the time Fielding Hall wrote *The Soul of a People*. The village boys still go to the monastery school and learn to read and write. The girls

have no school and do not learn to read and write. During the Japanese occupation Sarana and her family went to a village and grew their own food. As a trained teacher she did the obvious by opening a school for girls. Thirty little maidens soon gathered about her, but only for a short time. One by one they, but not their brothers, were called home to do the work that children are able to do, and in the end there were only seven left. This is not because girl-babies are less welcome than boy-babies, even though they are the inferior sex; indeed they may even be more welcome, because on marriage if they do not set up an independent home, it is more usual for the boy to go to the girl's home than the reverse, so that the training of girls is not wasted as it is in India where the joint family system demands that the girl leave her own family and go to that of her husband. No, the only reason why little girls do not learn to read and write is simply that it is not the custom. Later on I stayed a night in a nunnery at which there was a little girl from a village forty miles away, living with her nun-aunt in order that she might attend the government school, but hers was a most unusual case.

The plane took a round-about-route over the Irrawaddy valley, where there were dry sandy river beds, sparse trees, tobacco crops and only a few pleasantly wooded hills. Was the land more thickly timbered in the days when the Buddha's teaching first spread to Burma? Probably, but the seemingly arid country, unlike that of India, is not badly eroded and Burma produces more food than its people can eat.

The plane dropped down at Mandalay and there were U Aye Bo and Daw Nyunt all smiles. I felt like hugging little Daw Nyunt or at least shaking hands. But you do not do that sort of thing in Burma. You only smile. It turned out that many others had come to the airstrip but had to return in order to eat before noon. However, no sooner had I been driven through the splendid new entrance of Maha Bodhi and sat down at a table for lunch on Daw Nyunt's newly-improved cottage—with a Buddha shrine this time ! —than about thirty yogis came along. 'You see how many friends you have,' said U Aye Bo. It had never entered my head that they were gathering there just to greet me.

After this extraordinary warm welcome, especially from U Thein, it seemed utterly heartless to set off in two days for another meditation centre. But there was a strange urge to go to Mohnyin, the 'loving-kindness' centre six hours' journey away 'in the jungle'. U Thein showed not the slightest resentment. He produced a picture of Mohnyin and the Sayadaw there and said, 'Your instructor.' It was the leading of the Dhamma, was his only comment. He did not pretend to understand. I thought I did, but it turned out that the reason for going was far otherwise than I thought.

Sarana and I had tea with Dr Soni the next afternoon, or, to be more correct, we had orange juice, which does not count as food, and we inspected his large collection of Buddhist pictures, among which was one of the Emperor Asoka's daughter in the orange robes of a member of the Sangha, being 'worshipped' by the King of Ceylon when she presented him with a cutting of the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha had sat when he attained enlightenment. 'Nuns were members of the Sangha then just like monks,' he commented, and added that he had been trying to have them admitted as members of the Sangha again, but that his proposals had not met with favour.

It turned out that my bank had given me a letter of credit to a bank in Mandalay that had been dead for some years. Hence it came about that I had to set off for Mohnyin for probably a month with only £25 to maintain three people. Sarana had brought another nun, Sayalay Daw Eindawati, to act as cook. I thought that quite an unnecessary fuss was made about cooking, and that I could easily have cooked a little rice and a few beans for myself. But on no account could that be permitted. Only the best was allowed—and of course a nun acquired merit (to distribute to others) by cooking for a foreign yogi, or any yogi for that matter. For the same reason U Sein Maung, the kind merchant who had amassed (and distributed!) an enormous amount of merit on the last occasion by driving me here, there and everywhere, now added to the heap of distributed merit by driving the three of us to Mohnyin. We left at 5.30 a.m.—Burmese are never afraid of getting up before dawn ! —and set off mainly along newly-surfaced roads made under Ne Win's

military regime which was now about to terminate in the free elections which I had read would decide whether or not phongyi-worship would be compulsory. It rained on and off, most unusual for this time of the year and disastrous for the crops, but this would simply mean the farmers would have a little less money with which to build pagodas. The dull sky made the drive much pleasanter than it would otherwise have been for even the winter sun is very hot. The road lay across the flat lands of the Irrawaddy valley over which the plane had flown. Crops of sesame, beans and corn and newly-planted tobacco grew in the fields, bullock wagons loaded with fluffy white cotton trundled to market and herds of goats were being driven along to be slaughtered. The people here were staunch Buddhists, every one of them, but the precept concerning non-killing is not connected with goats. Villages were passed every few miles, the same shady trees overhanging bamboo cottages, white pagodas, some with gilded spires, the phongyi-khaung and a few orange-robed monks. The pagodas were solid cones, with Buddha shrines at four sides, if cones can be said to have sides. At the heart of them is always something precious, the relics of a saint, jewels, or at least gold or silver. During wartime some of the precious stones may be filched, but in peace-time not even the worst bandit would dream of interfering with something so precious.

After about five hours we caught the first glimpse of the golden spires of Mohnyin Pagoda, and as it got nearer it turned out to be a fantastic fairyland of gilded and coloured cement work. Sarana told me it was a completely new form of art and architecture, more especially as it was coloured, a dull red-brown and yellow and blue with designs that are unique. It had been the brainchild of the present aged Sayadaw. He had started it with a donation of £10; now it must be worth millions.

We drove in between two enormous white concrete elephants and an armed guard, and then down a laneway with the turreted walls of the women's meditation compound on one side and rest houses for pilgrims on the other, and the heaven-transporting wonderland pagoda just beyond them. It was the esoteric and the exoteric cheek by jowl, and yet completely separate. One of the inscriptions in the meditation compound even warned meditators

against being led astray by the distractions of the pagoda. Mostly the rest houses were of bamboo, but one was of brick with the very latest of building material, corrugated iron, while another concrete structure built by the millionaire, who made his millions from the famous Tiger Balm, had lifelike tigers prancing around a good advertisement as well as a merit-making monument and a service to pilgrims. The pilgrims sometimes bring their own food and cook for themselves, but if they so desire the nuns will provide the food and cook for them. They make a donation when they leave, but there is not much merit in making donations to nuns and also the pilgrims may be poor, so that the donations may not even be sufficient to cover the cost of the food.

We were taken into the house of one of the head nuns, a solid concrete building, with again the very latest in roofing, built for her by her well-to-do family. The Buddhist nunnery has little resemblance to that of Christendom. The nuns usually live together in twos, sometimes threes and occasionally fours, and each house has its own menage. These are then usually grouped together for the common purpose of learning or meditation; this, however, was exclusively a meditation centre. The men who had brought us went over to the monasteries and the men's quarters for the night before returning the next day, and we went to select meditation huts. A wave of peace seemed to issue from the meditation compound when the door was opened. Shady trees overhung the bamboo and weatherboard cottages, with a few fragrant frangipani among them, most inappropriate, one would think, for meditators who are not supposed even to use sandalwood rosaries lest the organ of smell be stimulated and the meditation disturbed thereby. The huts were larger than those of Maha Bodhi, being about ten feet square, but of course equally devoid of furniture other than the bamboo mat. There were thirty-two altogether, and some were large enough to hold a small party and with the little dovecote affair outside which betokened a Buddha shrine within. A solid wall of turreted concrete surrounded everything, with 'caves' built into it, large enough to lie down with the head on a small concrete 'pillow'. These caves opened on to a colonade roofed with corrugated iron so that meditators could walk up and down while meditating

during the rains. I chose a suitably remote hut, but concrete walls cannot keep out the howls of yelping dogs, nor pilgrim babies having their correct daily yell, nor devout pilgrims playing sermons on gramophones with loudspeakers attached. Sometimes the compound was outwardly as well as inwardly peaceful. Sometimes it was not.

At 4 p.m., as laid down by 'The Rules Made by the Mohnyin Monks', we went to pay respect to those at the head. We first attended upon the monk who would be called the Registrar. He was seated at the head of a small assembly of nuns and lay pilgrims—he probably had a lay male meditator as chaperon as prescribed by the Vinaya Rules, but I forgot to notice. He was calling the role and allocating tasks to the nuns. We were obviously in the same monk-dominated regime as at the Vegetarian Centre, but somewhat worse for there were no little boy novices to do the work, so that all was done by the nuns, except that of attendance to the monks' personal needs, which work it would not have been seemly for nuns to do and for which there were laymen yogis. When I left the vegetarian centre I fondly thought I had found deliverance from attachment to deep-rooted opinions and ideals, which is one of the asavas, the tendencies or biases which are part of human nature; but I found this was not so at all. The ideal of sex-equality and anti-clericalism began to stir a feeling of righteous indignation. I dutifully swallowed it down and 'paid respect' with frogwise body and head on the hands on the floor, three times over, while the Registrar-monk finished dealing with the nuns and administered the precepts to the lay pilgrims, the male ones sitting on their haunches as he did so. Then he turned to us and was duly presented with a bottle of lemonade and a handkerchief from Australia, this time dyed a proper orange. It turned out that he had a few words of English, for he had been to a government school in British days. He was genial and obviously secure and self-satisfied in his position of authority. He directed us to a monk senior to him. We again paid respect, left him and went into a semi-darkened room with the usual Burmese pretty-pretty adornments and many flowers. This august monk was reclining on an easy chair with his side to the door and made not the

slightest attempt to turn towards us as we grovelled on the floor and presented a second bottle of lemonade and orange handkerchief before him. He barked his questions in a voice that appeared to be filled with anything except loving-kindness but as Burmese voices are naturally raucous, my roused righteous indignation may very well have caused me to misjudge him. He was apparently reluctantly satisfied, and we were told to go into the room adjoining where the mighty Agga Maha Pandita himself reclined, on a kind of sofa I think, but the room was too dark to see properly. He was surrounded by what seemed an unnecessary number of chamber-pots, urinals and spittoons, and his high bed was against the wall nearby. A faithful lay yogi attendant sat near and spoke in a voice loud enough for the deaf man to hear. He was eighty-four, I was told; he was very frail and unable to walk, but there was nothing frail about his intellect or his voice. There was power in every movement of his arms and the striking one-third view of his face that we could see, for he, too, was turned with his side to the small group who sat below him on the floor. His was the brain that had conceived this preposterous fairyland and sought to govern with loving-kindness, a subject community consisting of 150 nuns, 10 monks and 15 laymen yogis, their attendants. During the war he was said to have put a canopy of loving-kindness over the pagoda, so that no bombs fell upon it. Being miles away in the country they would not have fallen on it anyhow, my cynical mind was saying, thinking of the armed guard that now protected it. But reluctantly I had to admit that this could be no ordinary man, not a saint or arahat, nor did he seem to radiate loving-kindness, but I did have the feeling of power and goodwill, the goodwill of a beneficent dictator.

A third bottle of lemonade and a third orange handkerchief were shuffled across the floor towards him, and Sarana explained my desire to learn his loving-kindness method of meditation. He said he was old and that he never gave instruction nowadays. However, since I had come from such a great distance—it turned out that I was the first Westerner to have come there—he would make an exception in my case. He then outlined the loving-kindness method with a frequently repeated refrain which

sounded like 'Chandee Chandee Gorrrr!' When Sarana translated I gathered that it meant something about embracing first this, then that and then the other with boundless love, but her translation was not very good, for not having trained in that method herself she was not familiar with it, so that it did not carry conviction. I wanted to learn it, but even before we prostrated our way through the flower-bedecked anti-room, I would see U Thein was right—to start a new method would be like returning to kindergarten after having got as far as high school.

The short twilight was falling when we got outside, but Sarana led us on a hasty sightseeing tour of the fantastic pagoda of half a million (5 lakhs) of Buddhas. Most of the half million were tiny ones seated on tiny concrete Bodhi trees leaves and giving the all-over impression of a series of fretwork designs, but there were larger Buddha statues, too. Seated or standing they lined the labyrinthine aisles of the central pagoda. A certain lady once left her sandals at the corner beneath a Buddha statue, but when she came to pick them up she found there were many corners and Buddha statues at every one of them and all alike. I was glad I carried my own sandals with me. You take your sandals off at the entrance to the pagoda compound. You collect the dust from the holy paths—tonight it was mud instead of dust—and then you try to take some of it off your feet on the huge mats placed at the entrance of the spotlessly clean pagoda itself. How much more reasonable I thought to myself, to have kept the sandals on while walking through the holy dust and taken them off only when going inside.

All Buddha statues are stylized and you may not depart from what tradition has ordained; they all have feminine features, though there is no evidence whatsoever in the Pali Canon for this, and, in any case, no statues were made until long after the Buddha's death, all the early records indicating his presence only by footprints or a parasol; his memory then was too holy to be materialized. The reason for the feminine features is probably the craving of human mind for balance. The Roman Church met the need by the Virgin Mary and Mahayana Buddhism by the goddess Bodhisattva Kwan-yin. But southern Buddhism kept too

strictly to the Pali texts to allow itself the liberties the Northern Mahayana took, so it had to get over the difficulty in another way.

The nuns were starting the evensong prelude to a two-hour group-meditation as we looked at a beautiful spiral stairway up to the top of a cylindrical tower, just the place from which to photograph the fairyland of spires. 'But women may not climb it,' Sarana said, 'for women are unclean.' That was the last straw to the steadily mounting righteous indignation which had commenced with the picture of the Emperor Asoka's daughter in yellow robes and Dr Soni's comment that any move to raise the status of nuns was frowned upon by the monks. Only a woman, and only a woman who had imbibed sex-equality with her mother's milk would have felt quite the same volume of righteous indignation; a man might even have lived at Mohnyin without ever being conscious of the fact that the nuns were merely servants of the monks. Men were not allowed to enter women's quarters nor the women the men's—except in the latter case for the purpose of sweeping and filling water-pots. Nuns might not accompany monks to the station except for the purpose of carrying their luggage.

'Nuns and women yogis are not allowed to sit alone or speak alone with a monk or man yogi.'

'Women must not approach or speak to any monk when they go to the monastery to fill the water-pots, and monks must not call to them or speak to them.'

'When nuns or lay women yogis get permission to see a monk, they must not stay long in his presence and they must avoid questioning, and seeking explanations about the Dhamma lesson he gives.'

Those are samples of 'The Rules Made by the Mohnyin Monks'. There rose to mind the order at Sevegram, Gandhi's ashram in the centre of India, where celibacy was equally insisted upon, but where men and women, boys and girls, worked, played and talked together—except that there was little time for talking in their work-filled life.

All this monk-worship and nun servility would be merely a source of amusement to the tourist—as had been to us the Nashi women of Western China with their tremendously heavy loads and the men carrying little baskets with a vegetable or perhaps an egg or two. The Western man, even though a meditator, would probably hardly have noticed it unless he were very unusual. But when you are a woman meditator and a member of the servile community, you notice it very much indeed. And when you have been trained to abhor sex and class superiorities the abhorrence upsets your equilibrium and causes pain.

The first reaction was to get away as quickly as possible, to return to Maha Bodhi where sex is not flung in one's face at every turn. U Sein Maung was returning the next day, why not return with him?

Then U Thein's words rose to mind: 'Never run away from pain; it will only return. Face it, become detached, and it will not return.' Further, the least feeling of righteous indignation or ill-will prevents right meditation and liberation from suffering. There was only one thing to do, to stay, face the issue, learn to find loving-kindness even towards monks who were worshipped as gods and who treated nuns as servants, and root out the 'asava' of attachment to ideals and ideas. This was the reason for the urge to go to Mohnyin, not to learn the loving-kindness method, not to find a quiet ashram in the forest, but simply to learn the lesson of tolerance and understanding for a pattern of life wholly abhorrent to convictions into which I had been born and bred.

As if to compensate for the self-satisfied superiority of the monks, the nuns were charming, humble and alive with love and kindness. They, as well as Sarana and Einda, taught the lesson of boundless love merely by their example. So that I should not be disturbed by the curious stares of pilgrims or the smell of their own diet of fish and fowl (being a loving-kindness centre, meat of animals was seldom eaten), they arranged that meals should be brought to my hut. When I offered to save them trouble by taking the tray back to the kitchen, they would not hear of it;

they acquired merit by helping anyone to become proficient in meditation; any service they could do was for their own benefit more than for mine. This idea of gaining merit—to distribute among all sentient beings—is something to which the Westerner finds it hard to grow accustomed. The only thing to do is to accept it graciously and try to emulate it. Of course a bathroom was located with a door so that the foreigner could 'bathe naked', but as there was no U Aye Bo to provide an enamel basin, I must confess to washing clothes in the aluminium dipper.

The day's routine, or, to be more correct, the clocks, were not as regular as at Maha Bodhi. The first bell rang *about* 3.30 a.m. when the nuns arose to meditate or say 'prayers' softly before starting the day's work. Rice-gruel followed about 6 a.m., and after that when I settled down to meditate again, the nuns carried on with their daily duties, which included cooking for themselves, the monks, and various pilgrims, sweeping the compounds including that of the men yogis, cleaning their own quarters and those of the monks, and of course the pagoda itself. The huge Dhamma Hall was scrubbed by the young girl-novices. There was also the clearing back of the 'jungle', the undergrowth around the pagoda compound and paths, the filling of the large earthenware water-pots for visiting pilgrims. The water was now drawn up by a petrol pump; before the installation of this the nuns would also have had the task of drawing up the water from the very deep wells. Lunch was *about* 10.30 a.m., after which there was supposed to be no more work for the nuns—and of course no more food—but if pilgrims arrived late and wanted feeding, the nuns would cook for them at any odd time; one afternoon we came upon them cooking for an extra large party of pilgrims at fireplaces improvised in the lane.

If there were no other jobs to be done the period after lunch was for laundry and washing, followed by a short spell for meditation. Then at 1 p.m. the huge Dhamma drum boomed forth. This monstrous affair was mounted at the top of a stand and one of the male yogis skilfully banged it by hurling at it a piece of thick knotted rope. Gradually the nuns from a tiny novice of five years to old ladies of over eighty made their way

past the guardian Nats in to the huge gilded hall, whose very atmosphere seemed to be golden. Many of the nuns carried on their heads what Sarana called ‘little pillows’, small wooden stools about three inches high and often a doll’s-size pillow. As I had found out at the vegetarian centre, the proper way to listen to a sermon even though it goes on for two hours, is to sit with feet sideways on the floor and hold the hands prayer-wise; and as I had also discovered there, it is very natural to get tired and fall forward, with the head on the hands, on the floor. These little pillows were designed so that you could fall forward more gracefully and comfortably. At first I was told that listening to this two-hour sermon was compulsory for at least one nun from each house, because the sermons were not popular, and the monks found they were arriving with their carefully-prepared sermons and no audience to listen to them. There may have been some truth in this, but the Rules distinctly said that during their period a nun could stay in her house or meditation hut and meditate; silence was all that was compulsory. The sermons were primarily for the benefit of nuns and no monks attended, but male yogis sometimes did, and also pilgrims both male and female. Any males who attended sat behind the preacher. Nuns were never allowed to preach in the Dhamma Hall, but sometimes during Lent they would give discourses in their own quarters.

When the sermon was over, about 3 p.m.—I once noted it did not end until 3.40 p.m. !—there were no more fixtures until 6 p.m. unless a head nun had to wait upon the Registrar monk for instructions as to work that required doing. But between the sermon and 6 p.m., the novice-girls spent two hours learning to read and write Burmese, not with their noses on the ground this time, but sitting on benches at a table. If they wished for any other learning than this, they must go to another centre or nunnery, for this was a meditation, not a learning, centre. The girls came entirely of their own accord, usually because they admired an aunt or sister who was already a nun. At this time there were about eight of them; they were free to leave any time they wanted.

At 6 p.m. the gong-bell tolled for two hours group-meditation in an open-walled mosquito-frequented shrine room, and no monks presided over it. Like attendance at the sermons, this also was not compulsory and nuns might meditate in solitude. The group-meditation began and ended with about fifteen minutes of chanting the radiations of loving-kindness. The chanting had a haunting rhythm hard to reproduce, and it would not sound the same unless you heard it from the moonlit shadowed meditation compound with its few faint lights under the dim shady trees and the thin pain of the silver-toned pagoda bells which fell to meet the hearing as the noises of the day died down. These tiny metal bells are the shape of leaves of the Bodhi tree and are so delicately balanced on their frail wire that the faintest movement of the air sends them shivering against each other; on the stillest night the hot air rising from the earth to meet the colder air above, stirs them just sufficiently to sing their song of endless pain. And to make the song of pain complete there would come upon the stillness the sudden yelp of a pariah dog.

The group-meditation ended at 8 p.m. with the same chanting of radiations of loving-kindness. The lights were supposed to go out probably an hour later, but the time varied every night.

This was the setting in which I sat down to wrestle with the problem of detachment, loving-kindness and tolerance for alien ways and thinking.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LEARNING THE LESSON OF MOHNYIN

No self within this body's fragile frame,
But only changing elements that come and go,
And all determined by their being's Law.
It is not you who make the seeming worms
Steal softly o'er the skin or needles prick;
You will it that they go; they heed you not.
And likewise, too, the body heats that rise
And fall away when time has run its course.
And nagging thoughts of men in yellow robes
Revered as gods and nuns their servant class—
Only the changing matter of the brain,
And thoughts impinging it; they come, they go—
As swift as summer-lightning's after glow!

No self to weep at what you cannot change!
No self to suffer pride or know remorse,
Or feel illwill, malevolence or pain !—
All changing atoms, and your little self,
Its hope and fear, its passion and despair,
But flicking shade upon the Pure White Light
of Deathlessness!

The meditation hut in which I alternated between sitting lotus-like and lying corpse-like under a mosquito net to solve this unexpected problem, was as devoid of furniture as those at Maha Bodhi. But being built of bamboo instead of timber the net was hung on to bits of bamboo stuck into the interstices of the pattern, so there was no unpleasant nails sticking out to endanger the feet when doing the daily dozen yoga exercises in the dark.

There was also a little gate to the verandah so that Sarana's fears that dogs would mistake leather sandals for meat were allayed. The only serious distraction from outside were tiny brown ants and I was never sure whether the uncomfortable pricks were the working of the Dhamma in my own body or within the ant community. Bandages soaked in raw oil round the legs of the hut would be the cure, Sarana said, but the nun in charge of such matters was too busy to attend to this for a long time. The second afternoon Sarana meditated with me but the ants were too serious a distraction for one who had no sheet sleeping-bag. I have often wondered how far the sleeping-bag is responsible for my never having met bugs or fleas when travelling even in the filthiest of places, except once in China in a missionary's house—when sleeping between spotless sheets and not in my own dirty sleeping-bag.

The most delightful outward distraction were the squirrels which darted like lightning from tree to tree. They were hardly the size of rats, but their tails were as long as themselves, and four to six feet in a flying leap was nothing to them. They ate everything including banana skins and orange pips. As well they chewed the acrid bark of the tamarind trees, and sometimes succeeded in ring-barking a whole tree and killing it. The Buddha would certainly have used the object lesson to point out how tiny ceaseless gnawing may destroy something very strong and big, and that likewise ceaseless meditation on impermanence may destroy attachments—or aversions—to the things of this world, including the dictatorship of monks! Metaphors and similes in the Buddhist scriptures seem to be turned the opposite way round to ours, that is, they take an unpleasant result to illustrate how by similar methods something worthwhile may be brought about in another field. But so far the ceaseless meditation on merger in the waves of creation and destruction did not seem to be making any headway on the problem of becoming reconciled to monkish superiority over nuns and lay people. The unfortunate Sarana had to bear the brunt of the bad temper that results when there is inner conflict, and she may well have regretted that we were spending more than an hour a day in each other's company for the purpose of translating the method

of the Maha Bodhi Vipassana meditation which now appears in the Appendix.

About the third day one of the pilgrims made a gift of food to monks and nuns, and male and female yogis. Visiting nuns, who accompanied the donor, cooked for everybody and this was much appreciated. Otherwise when visiting pilgrims bring donations of special food this merely means extra cooking for meditating nuns who have presumably risen so far above the lusts of the palate that they are not interested in expensive foods. There was another donation of food a few days later. I tried to do my duty by eating my share of it, but the stomach did not appreciate the 'dana' at all. Sarana told me afterwards that it is only necessary to taste it. It is quite in order for the dogs to eat the rest. The next 'dana' was of money, two kyats to each nun and female yogi and ten to each monk. The money was far more appreciated, for it could be used for buying soap, candles and other necessities. According to the Vinaya Rules the monks could not take the money themselves, so the male yogis took it for them. The monk to whom it was donated could hint for anything he needed; if the male yogi did not take the hint, the monk could repeat it three times; after that if the hint were not taken the matter must be dropped. I never found out how the male yogis kept their accounts of the trust moneys under their control, but it would be most surprising if the first hint were not immediately complied with either out of trust funds or otherwise.

The theme to which the mind had unconsciously switched back before leaving Maha Bodhi on the first visit was that of body and mind being merged in a sea of ceaseless change. A small white object now seemed to appear in the midst of the sea, and as concentration progressed the sea seemed gradually to solidify, and nothing I could do would make it mobile again. This would never do. The essence of phyit-pyet is movement. So I changed to conceiving of merger in a swirling mass of vaporous atoms. It is when changes in the mind like this take place that one appreciates an instructor, but none was to hand and tension and strain were becoming obvious. So on the fifth day I decided to

ease the strain by a visit to the world outside, whose noises swept across the concrete wall.

Several bus-loads of pilgrims were wandering around the Pagoda and of course their attention at once shifted from sacred scenes to the first white-skinned person most of them had seen. 'Is she a pilgrim?' they asked. 'No, a yogi,' replied Sarana, not without a trace of pride. 'And where does she come from?' 'From Australia,' but Sarana might just as well have said Timbuktu, for they had probably never heard of England, let alone Australia, and that applied even to most of the learned monks who delivered the two-hour sermons, for though they might know the Pali Texts of the Buddhist Scriptures by heart, they would know nothing else, unless they had been to a government school, and this would be impossible if they had become monks while still children, as many had.

We left the pilgrims behind and went across to the new Pagoda, which had been specially erected to receive the charred remains of the Venerable Agga Maha Pandita when he should lay aside his decaying body. After his dust was placed in the now open niche, it would be sealed over and a Buddha statue placed at the outside. These at least would be genuine relics, but how far other relics whether Catholic or Buddhist are genuine mortal remains, only the believing will ever know. They are worshipped and that is what matters. True, worship before Pagodas or Buddha images does not bring deliverance from suffering. Only meditation, a pure life and the ending of desire can do that. However, by worshipping these things merit is believed to be acquired which may lead to a better rebirth and greater aptitude for the work that really counts. But probably the vast majority of pilgrims who offered flowers and burnt candles and said the Refuges before these shrines never gave the matter a thought. They were acquiring merit; that was all, and of course, having acquired it, they remembered to distribute it among all sentient beings.

Trees had been planted around the new pagoda and would probably be fairly well-grown by the time the mighty Sayadaw made his last earthly trip to the niche awaiting him. The Burmese

passion for tree-planting would be envied by tree-lovers' leagues in my own country, but trees are a hindrance to photography. Not only do Burmese always huddle under trees, for only mad dogs and Englishmen go out into the sun, but also trees hide pagodas, and only the tops of the spires of the main pagoda were now visible from the Sayadaw's new one. Indeed, not being allowed to climb the cylindrical tower which would have given a splendid view of that sea of sparkling spires, I found it impossible to locate a place from which the whole Pagoda could be seen. Even so it was sufficiently overwhelming. How could the mind of man have conceived that fabulous fairyland of spangles? And workmen were busy replacing paint with prismed glass to make more spangles.

Once again it seemed to me that this ornate art was the work of the child-mind not, as I previously thought, the child-mind to which belongs the Kingdom of Heaven in the sense of Nirvana, but rather that of the lighthearted little one who remembers the party by the coloured paper and Christmas by the tinsel and the lights. Whether one found this form of art appealing or wearying, one could only gasp in amazement at the exquisitely thought-out detail. Not only were there half a million Buddhas, each seated on its little Bodhi leaf, but the artists had given themselves full rein when it came to modelling fruit and flower offerings in concrete. There were life-like bananas, durians, paw paws, oranges and flowers. And there were even more life-like Nats standing guard and thoroughly enjoying life, while round the dragon lakes there were elephants in concrete so real you could almost feel the delight with which they were racing over the hills. Nearly all the stories depicted were from the Jataka tales, stories of the Buddha in previous lives, and the legend was written in Burmese underneath. There was, however, one from the Pali Canon with the moral in the Canon omitted altogether. It was the story of the wealthy citizen who erected a costly bowl at the top of a tall pillar, and said that it would belong to whatever sage, saint or Brahmin could take it down. The artist had enjoyed himself immensely depicting the struggles of various nearly-naked ascetics clambering on top of each other's shoulders, but not so convincing was the image of the Buddha's monk, Pindola,

who had floated up by means of his supernormal powers and was now stuck at the top with his back to the pillar and the bowl on the opposite side. Moral endings evidently did not appeal to the artist as much as miracles, and there was no sign of the Buddha reproving Pindola for having displayed his supernormal powers, bidding the bowl be broken up, and making a rule that monks must not display any supernormal powers they possessed, for such display did not make for edification, but rather turned aside those who were already started on the Way to Nirvana. The Buddha's teaching did not offer anything for those who crave for exoteric show and miracles, but his disciples have made up many times over for his omission.

And then we turned back from this fairyland of fantasy, and re-entered the esoteric side of Buddhism within the walls of the meditation compound, where in rhymed verse we were bidden not to be distracted by the things of the world outside. Nearly all religions have the exoteric and the esoteric side. But it would be hard to find them so consciously and obviously side by side as at Mohnyin. 'And did you not long for the austere plain grace of Greek art? Did you not tire of this ornate pretty-prettiness?' I was asked by someone after seeing my colour slides. I had not given the matter any thought. I was not interested in art, and not long enough outside the meditation compound to tire of it. But I have to admit that the Taj Mahal did waken an answering chord of awe which this form of art did not do.

A few days later there was another 'dana', donation, again of money. This day I attended it myself. The more serious nuns wore dark russet red, the Mohnyin colour. The petal-pink robes were worn by nuns who perhaps did not expect to remain for good or who were not prepared to take the whole ten precepts which precluded handling money. The donor had done up her gifts in paper, again two kyats for each nun and ten for each monk, and five hundred for the Sayadaw for the Pagoda. She had placed the 'dana' on a tray and the nuns chanted blessings as they filed past her. The donor was probably a leading merchant lady. As has been said, a majority of merchants were women. Even if the woman were not a principal breadwinner in the family, the husband would still entrust all the earnings to her. No

one doubted a woman's business acumen; moreover, she is completely free from her husband's control and does not change her name on marriage. None the less she is of the inferior sex. We learned in our school history that the authority which held the purse-strings ruled the country, and that was why Parliament was so anxious to get the power of taxation. But the premise is certainly not true in Burma.

'And what did you get to eat? Were you being properly fed?' people ask over and over again. There was nothing wrong with the food supplied, except perhaps the polished rice, for everyone was most anxious to supply what would be palatable to a vegetarian non-Burmese palate. To the type of food given to me, the nuns would add to their own, spices, condiments, chillies, fish and fowl and perhaps meat, for, although the rules forbade the sale of meat within the precincts of a Loving-Kindness Centre, they did not absolutely prohibit it being brought in and eaten. A type of dish they especially liked was something sour, that is to say, if you had an unripe fruit to which *we* would add sugar, they enjoyed it as it was. Another delicacy was pickled tea, to my palate as abominable as betel nut. Incidentally the Rules of Mohnyin forbade both the chewing of betel and smoking because these practices meant a waste of time and were therefore a hindrance to meditation.

Under the shady trees which overhung the laneway between the exoteric and the esoteric, there were food stalls and a restaurant with child-size chairs and low tables, for Burmese people are short. The proprietors, husband and wife, smoked enormous cheroots liable to drop their ashes into the food. The prices were written up in Burmese and ranged from one quarter to one kyat, prices by no means low, for a labourer earned only three kyats a day. Another food stall proprietor had built a little fireplace into the ground under the shade of a large tree, and here he fried sliced gourds in batter while you waited, and his wife served tea with milk and sugar for which the price was one quarter of a kyat, but plain Burmese tea was thrown in free of charge. There were a few other stalls at one of which Sarana

would buy our fruit and vegetables, while others offered rosaries and a few nick-nacks, as well as the ubiquitous cigarettes, cigars, pickled tea and betel—for pilgrims of course, not for yogis!

When the photographic expedition on alternate days took place after breakfast, we would see the nuns at their multifarous tasks. Cooking was the chief task. It was done at open fireplaces towards the side of the kitchen with a specially contrived roof instead of chimney; this was built with an aperture at the apex, and over this was built another roof carrying the ridging and therefore able to prevent the rain from coming in. It seemed a most ingenious invention, for you got all the warmth of the fire, none being wasted up a chimney. Of course, the fireplaces were built only a few inches above the ground, for everyone crouched on the ground, everyone except the two elderly nuns who had specially raised fireplaces to save their knees from having to bend—one would have thought 'paving respect' would have kept the knees supple until death, but apparently not.

The other main task of the nuns was cleaning—cleaning the buildings, cleaning the litter left by the pilgrims, cleaning up the dead leaves which were forever falling. In the process of sweeping up leaves they not only removed the natural fertilizer, but about nine inches of top soil as well. However, sweeping up leaves was merit-acquiring, and though it went sadly against my soil-conservation ideas, I sometimes joined the leaf-sweepers, and so did another lay woman yogi. On one occasion a well-dressed pilgrim joined, too, likewise to acquire merit, I supposed. But the only dead leaves she appeared interested in gathering into her delicate hands were those on a wooden platform on which I happened to be sitting. I could almost hear her reporting the matter afterwards, 'My dear, I was most fortunate; she was not shut up in the hut, but outside under a tree. She had short wavy hair all grey. I should think she must be very old, ninety or perhaps even a hundred. Her hands were frightfully coarse, not fine and smooth like ours and her lips were thin like a dog's. But she had perfect teeth, not a single one missing. Do you think it might be true that white people have all their own teeth taken out and others put in their place? Yes, her

skin was pale, but not as white as I had expected, and she had pink cheeks.'

This lady leaf-gatherer had come in at one of the times when I had left the hut because concentration was failing. But on the whole it was fairly good. The merging in the whirling mist of changing atoms seemed to work tolerably well and there were reasonably long periods of absorption, but not as long or as often as on the first visit to Maha Bodhi. Sometimes, too, there would be the former feeling of strain round the heart as if climbing a mountain too quickly, and a new pain between the shoulders at the back when the only comfortable position for meditation was lying down.

At the end of nine days I was summoned to meet again the venerable Agga Maha Pandita. A man who spoke excellent English had been lined up as interpreter, a little insulting to Sarana, I thought, but perhaps as well, for Sarana has an unusually soft and feminine voice for a Burmese woman, and deaf people usually find male voices easier to hear. The interpreter started at once by misunderstanding what I said. Learned Burmese often seem extremely suspicious of Westerners and always on the *qui vive* to catch us out in some heresy such as the suggestion that human beings have souls. I tried to save him from giving me a lecturette on Anatta, by giving him one instead, but it did not make his interpreting more correct, and Sarana had frequently to intervene. I confessed my sin of having kept to the Maha Bodhi method instead of the one he had imparted. He was very nice about it, saying I could stay as long as I liked, even though I did not use the loving-kindness method. There was then some discussion about the Maha Bodhi method, but it cut no ice until U Thein's name was left out and the Ledi Sayadaw's substituted, Ledi Sayadaw being the monk who originated the method now taught by U Thein. It was easy to see that U Thein would gather a lot more prestige were he to don the yellow robes.

We then returned to our huts and continued with the translation of the Ledi Sayadaw's instructions. We both found we had not experienced all the jhanas, or stages of concentration,

before we passed on to the Vipassana side. Later on U Thein said that this was not necessary. All that is required is that visions should be seen to show that a reasonable degree of concentration has been obtained. As we got towards the end of our translation I realized that I had not been practising the technique exactly as set forth. Probably the kind man who had outlined the ceremony to me had been too intent on the theoretical side and the doctrines of Dukkha, Anicca, Anatta and Nama Rupa and that sort of thing, so that he had overlooked the minor matter of the technique which is extraordinarily simple. I changed to the correct method and at once recapitulated in a mild form the various bodily symptoms I had experienced at Maha Bodhi. There was also a very vivid blissful experience of the complete non-existence of any 'self'. The technique seemed extremely easy compared with what I had been attempting. All that was necessary was just to look at those ceaselessly changing particles within the body and the brain. There was no need to struggle or strive to attain. It was a wonderful experience. But it was followed by unutterable exhaustion and drowsiness, so that it was impossible to keep awake despite many yoga exercises which are supposed to make one wakeful and many peregrinations round the compound at midnight; the body slept and slept and did not even hear the 3.30 a.m. bell. Having learned to relax it seemed drugged with exhaustion....

This may have been the beginning in the sub-conscious of the break-up of the equality complex, but in the conscious there was still no sign. I recalled the well-known story told by the learned monk, Buddhaghosa, nine centuries after the Buddha in his 'Visuddhimagga' (Path of Purification, p. 21) of a monk who happened to pass a very beautiful woman who had put on her best clothes and run away from her husband. The monk was asked if he had seen her. He replied that whether it was a man or woman he had not noticed, but only that a bag of bones had passed by on the high road. The moral is that a man can attain such detachment that he sees a beautiful girl as she really is, merely bones covered with skin. When I saw a well-dressed merchant go down on his face to one of the monks who passed by with his obvious sell-satisfied superiority, I asked myself

facetiously what would be the reaction if the venerable one had been described as merely a bagful of bones to whom no respect was due. Veneration is not supposed to be paid to a monk personally, but to the yellow robe, as the symbol of self-renunciation. This, however, is not quite correct as will be seen later.

Another complex which caused distress was the kindness-to-animals-one. It is useless to be disturbed and upset by anything for it does not help to alter it and it only undermines one's own strength. Also, in this case, was the neglect of dogs any different in its effect on suffering than our own over-care of the sick—the friend dying of cancer whose misery the doctors deliberately prolong? The result in either case is unnecessary suffering, and we do not end it by getting emotionally involved. There was a skinny dirty white and brown bitch with her ribs sticking out, which used to come and lose her miseries for awhile curled up in a sunny spot on the verandah of the next hut until someone drove her off. She had a sorrowful wrinkled face and I used to wonder whether mine were the first eyes that had looked upon her with compassion, or whether she was so deadened with pain that she could never respond to loving thoughts. Most of the pariah dogs were bitches. There was quite a good-looking male dog which appeared properly fed, but nearly all the others were skin and bone and diseased patches, not that they lacked food like many pi dogs, for there was ample food to spare when there was a gift-giving and that happened fairly often; but the principal food left over would be polished white rice and therefore devoid of vitamins; the other food containing the vitamins would be fought over and the weaker dogs would have to go without.

One morning Sarana took me to the house where an aged nun had died. A week before she had felt dizzy when coming from the Dhamma Hall after the sermon. Four days later she took to her bed and could eat no solids. The nuns took it in turn to sit beside her dying body, softly chanting sutras. The day before, Sarana had visited her and wished her peace; she was gasping a little but she had all her faculties and was able to say 'Sadhu! Sadhu !'— an untranslatable phrase which means thanks and blessing, though the literal translation is 'Well done!' This

morning she died and the chanting ceased, for this was a Vipassana centre and everyone knew there had been no permanent self within the transient body, and that now that life had gone, all was resolved into the elements of which it was composed. Only the karma of what had been her desires would shape another character in another body. Her monk-son sat cross-legged on the wooden platform outside her open shutters. He had given instructions that no relatives must take anything that had been hers. All she possessed must pass to her fellow nuns. That afternoon she would be buried, for in Burma only monks and Hindus are cremated, and her body must be buried the same day, unlike a monk's which may be embalmed and left several days.

In the afternoon the gong-bells tolled slowly and solemnly, the last vibration dying away before the bell was struck again. Ten trays had been stacked with such things as bananas, candles and soap for the ten Mohnyin monks, for funerals are an opportunity for making donations to the living gods. Four laymen placed the corpse on a four-legged stretcher and the nuns gathered around and chanted the Sutra that Brahma spoke after the Buddha passed into utter Nirvana:

> All creatures in this world shall lay aside
> The aggregate (as which they lived) as now
> Even the Master, even such as he,
> Person without rival in the world,
> Tathagata who won and wielded powers,
> Buddha Supreme, hath wholly passed away.
>
> Alas! impermanent is everything in life!
> Growth is its very nature, and decay.
> They spring to being and again they cease.
> Happy the mastery of them and the peace.
>
> (Kindred Sayings s, p. 197)

And they concluded with the Burmese verse,

Our bodies are as nothing.
Anon they will be buried
Even as this is buried.

The monks led the procession. Then came two laymen striking the gong-bells deliberately and slowly. Nuns followed with the trays of donations and after them a man carrying flowers. There was still no lamentation and no tears. Then came the corpse carried by four laymen; the other nuns and the laywomen brought up the rear. The procession went out through the back gate to the field where a grave had been dug. Outside the gate the relatives gave a cake of soap and a box of matches to each of the nuns and lay people who came—it is the custom to make donations at all funerals and, when the deceased is wealthy, presents may be given to a thousand or more as in the case of U Aye Bo's mother.

There must be no lamentation within the Vipassana Centre, but once outside the gate the relatives gave way to their natural emotions and wept just a little. Near the grave mats were placed for the monks, and the trays placed in front of the mats. The other people sat in the dust while one of the monks administered the nine precepts—there must always be at least one monk at a burial to administer the precepts. Then all repeated three times the meditation upon death: 'All things perish. Soon all that now live will perish even as our sister has perished.' One of the relatives poured water, drop by drop, from a bowl into a cup and then on to the open grave, a donation to the Nat spirit of the earth, as had happened when the Buddha vanquished the hosts of Mara. The corpse was lowered into the grave, but the toes, which had been tied together for convenience when being carried, must be cut apart, and one of the men went down into the grave to do this. Each one present put at least one handful of dust to cover the dust that had departed. And that was all.

Seven days after the death of an ordinary person, the relatives must make a further donation to monks, a final 'dana' of the

deceased whose spirit is still here. But those at the Vipassana Centre know that the deceased never had a spirit of its own, and that it consisted only of ceaselessly changing elements. There is only the Deathless Essence, but no individual soul to remain near the body of the deceased for seven days after death, and therefore it is useless to pretend the deceased can gain more merit by donations made by relatives to monks seven days after it has been resolved into its component parts.

The dust had returned to the dust to fertilize the farmer's fields. In a short time he would plough the field where the deceased had been buried, and perhaps the tobacco that grew there would have greener and brighter leaves.

The nun's face had looked very peaceful as she lay in death, and who knew that she had not made an ending of all that had to be done, so that there would be no more karma to give rise to a further rebirth? 'It might be so,' said Sarana. 'Who knows whether or not a person has become an arahant?'

That was the funeral as Sarana described it to me. I did not go to it myself, for time for meditation seemed too precious to spend more than about an hour every other day or so outside the meditation compound. Time was flying and the asava of attachment to ideals and ideas seemed no nearer being rooted out. I remembered the stimulation of meditation at Maha Bodhi in the presence of experienced meditators at the second initiation ceremony, and after three days of complete silence I decided to go to the evening group meditation here. At the mosquito hour of six o'clock, I donned a coat and butter muslin towel, which proved uncomfortably hot, and sat down with the others in front of the shrine. But before the radiations of loving-kindness had been fully chanted, dog-fights commenced, and continued to rage on and off during the whole two hours. I gathered that a male intruder was disputing the supremacy of the king of the pagoda harem, and that while the Sayadaw's meditation on loving-kindness might have prevented bombs from falling, it did nothing to dispel the hatred of these two animals for each other. One of the nuns, who was walking up and down as she meditated, threw something at the warring dogs, but the effect

was short-lived. I sat the two hours out, but it was an ordeal, not a stimulation. When we returned, the peace of the meditation compound once again flowed out to meet us. I decided the Dhamma did not intend me to have any assistance from group meditation.

It was Christmas Eve. Three weeks had gone and still the lesson of Mohnyin had not been learned. Then suddenly the air cleared, the problem solved itself, as problems always do when, in Jung's words, we 'leave the simple growth of the psychic processes in peace!' and give up our own self-will.

I saw that this monk-worship is essential to the pattern of Burmese life, and that to end it would be to destroy the morale of the people and end their happiness and contentment. The little village monastery, with its three or four monks, is the centre of village life. To worship the monks and serve them is the greatest blessing of all; 'to look on the yellow robe is to feel cool' so that evil-doing is restrained. Take the yellow robe away and people would have nothing to look up to, nothing to remind them that there is something more than growing rice and cotton. And the real Burma is not in Rangoon or even Mandalay, it is in those thousands of little villages.

Suppose, too, that a well-meaning reformer were to insist that some of the huge donations to the pagoda were given to the nuns to purchase food, soap or candles and so save them from having to go long distances to their villages twice a year to procure such things. The nuns would be the first to complain, for they would be deprived of the merit of serving the monks. To give is the greatest joy of the Burmese and to give to monks is the best giving of all.

It is all most illogical. But it works. And men and women are not governed by logic.

And then I began to feel sorry for the monks. 'Verily they have their reward.' 'Gains and favours', to use a stock phrase in the Pali Text translations, make it difficult for a person to be humble and lowly of heart, difficult to find in actual experience that he has no self, difficult to deny self, and find Anatta, and

without finding these things in actual experience, he cannot find the peace which passes understanding, the peace of Nirvana when all thoughts of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ and ‘me’ have been dissolved.

And then a little novice nun brought a mixed crowd of pilgrims right into the forbidden meditation compound to view the white animal. They clung to the uprights of the verandah of my hut exactly as children cling to the bars of monkey-cages!

After the mastery of the lesson of Mohnyin and that little interlude, the physical symptoms experienced at Maha Bodhi returned again, and that was satisfactory, although uncomfortable.

CHAPTER NINE

MOHNYIN VILLAGERS AND MEDITATORS

It was Christmas Day. I told Sarana I was going on a really big expedition—to the railway station and the village, perhaps a mile or more away! She would not hear of my going alone. Daw Nyunt had told her she must never let me out of the meditation compound unaccompanied. There were dogs and doubtful characters and always people who had never seen a white skin before. After all the adventures of an unusually adventurous life, I almost developed righteous indignation again. However, Sarana would celebrate Christmas with me. She had been to a Christian school and knew all about nuts and raisins and that sort of thing, so she packed up a basket of the nearest to nuts and raisins she could find and Einda came too.

On the way along the dusty road to the station we crossed a dubious bridge; it appeared to be built of petrol drums with the bottoms cut out and some soil on top, and wholly inadequate to carry the bus loads of pilgrims. Other people thought so also, and two men, one with a collection box and a large bell and the other in a deck-chair with an account book, accosted all who came. I put a quarter of a kyat in the box—for the purpose of my being photographed, I confess, not for the good work. Soon after there came a nun with a tray on her head going for alms. So as to help rectify the 'little merit in giving to a nun' adage, I gave her a whole kyat. The bridge collector was furious—a quarter for him and a whole one for a mere nun! Later, when I passed over the bridge in a jeep, I did have rather a guilty feeling that if the bridge collapsed under its weight I would have been partly responsible.

The station beyond consisted of an open lattice-work shed with a window for buying tickets and no platform at all. We ate our Christmas dainties under the shadow of the white-washed village pagoda and then walked down the narrow lane between high banks to the village itself, where the women smoked huge cheroots and carried baskets on their heads. One of them was taking the seeds from the cotton and indicated that her own longyi was made from homespun cotton. It was a sight that would have delighted Gandhi's heart for it showed that village industries are still alive. Then we went to the monastery just outside the village where Sarana duly 'paid respect' with her face literally in the dust, to the four orange-robed ones. There were also some little orange-robed boys who would be ordained with due ceremony that evening. One little fellow's robes were dragging on the ground rather pitifully. 'He only put them on last night,' said his proud mother, filling his huge black bowl with food; 'he has not got used to them yet.' A man with a fine intelligent face, but minus two teeth, organized the photography and even found a dark spot in which to change a film. The cattle were also fine-looking creatures, well fed and cared for, but their milk is not the universal food it is in India. It is given only to children.

On the return we saw the petal-pink nun labour force clearing the jungle back from the walls, a sight which would have raised righteous indignation a few days ago, and now only a slightly quicker pace across the tobacco field to secure a vantage point for a photo.

It had been a crowded hour and a half of sensual pleasures and Christmas Day was very happy. But a few days later, when we wanted to buy stamps but could not because it was Sunday, we found it had not been Christmas Day after all, but only Christmas Eve. So Christmas Day was spent in meditation, as Christmas Day should always be spent, and the only other laywoman yogi and I had the meditation compound to ourselves.

No one seemed to know how this yogi managed her cooking or her food, for she had taken a vow of silence for three months, and never went outside the meditation compound. When the first

rays of sunlight stole through the shady trees, she would sit crouched in a small patch of warmth with a striped shawl around her, looking exactly like a little gnome. She bathed when no one else was about and kept strictly to herself, but when she overheard Einda telling Sarana she had finished her soap, she went to her hut and shortly returned and silently offered a cake of it—she was a soap merchant when 'in the world', I was told. Before I left she gave me some fruit, and a couple of days later I gave her a handkerchief. She smiled with gratitude and 'paid respect' to me as her elder. Her face had a look of great calm and peace for one still so young.

She, Sarana and Einda and I were the only full-time residents in the meditation compound, but various of the nuns would come to it overnight. There were also Nats, or nature spirits. Some of them, so I was told, were even Sotapannas, or first degree saints, and having them present was of assistance to human meditators. Sometimes a candle was lit to gain their goodwill and help. After I heard about the Nats I made a point of asking everyone with whom I talked whether he or she had seen a Nat, or at least been conscious of the presence of one. But no one had. This was most surprising, for though I myself have never seen such beings, I have several times suspected their presence. When camping alone in Norfolk Island, the scene of the cruellest of all the cruel convict settlements, I once found the hairs of my head standing on end with terror for no accountable reason as I entered the jungle one night, and similarly I have known sudden feelings of inexplicable bliss and joy when passing through certain bushland glades. Further, I have twice met people, whose veracity there was no reason to doubt, who told me under seal of secrecy lest they be ridiculed that they had in fact seen such nature spirits. Despite the fact that I heard no evidence whatever for the existence of the Nats in Burma, no one has the slightest doubt about them, and probably everyone has shrines to the Nats in his house and burns candles for them.

Towards the end of the visit a young nun came to the meditation compound for a month's meditation, but of course she had to attend to her usual tasks between 3.30 and 10.30 a.m. She gave me a banana. Sarana said the gift was of no more

significance than a similar gift in the west. But Sarana was wrong. She next gave me a sweet white-root salad vegetable, and then a handkerchief. When she brought the handkerchief, she tried to tell me in worse than broken English that she loved me very much and badly wanted to learn English. I conferred with Sarana as to the possibility of her getting a position as housemaid in the Roman Catholic school where Sarana and her sister taught, but found it was not possible and that in any case she could never learn English unless she took off the robes and returned to 'the low life of the world'. We arranged a conference and broke the news to her. She was sad. She had seen Sarana with me and it had seemed so easy. She did not know that, in addition to being taught in English all her school days, Sarana had also served in a telephone exchange. Poor lass! After we eventually left I realized I had not sought her out to bid her 'goodbye', and I have been remorseful ever since.

In an endeavour to sort out what was fact and what fiction concerning Mohnyin, Sarana arranged an interview with two elderly nuns, who were relatives of Daw Nyunt. Their double-storey bamboo house lay down a different laneway from those near the Pagoda. All was extremely clean and tidy and there was no suspicion of offending leaves. Neat stacks of firewood stood outside the kitchen doors of each house, and there was a general atmosphere of simplicity and yet plenty. The two ladies, aged sixty-five and sixty-two, wore the dark russet-red robes showing that they had taken the ten precepts of the monks including that of not handling money or gold and silver. The dark russet-red was the uniform of Mohnyin; the robes were dyed with no modern synthetics, but genuine bark of a tree, and the colour was in keeping with a forest hermitage, though, in fact, there was no forest near by, but perhaps once there was. They said the russet-red was more serviceable than the petal-pink for it did not show every mark; in the early days of Mohnyin all had worn it—which must have been most inconvenient. Who received the donations of money? Or were there laywomen yogi in those days to handle gold and silver?

They were definite that it was not compulsory to attend the two-hour sermons; nuns might stay in their own houses or huts to meditate during this period. Further, it was possible to get the permission of the Registrar-monk to take a vow of ten to fifteen days of silence, spend it in a hut and be absolved from work altogether during that time; for of course the russet-red robed nuns had their work like everyone else. These two ladies were in charge of the health of the community and the care of the sick, with six younger nuns to assist them. As well as this, they had their share of looking after and cooking for pilgrims, including those sent to them by the Registrar; the room on the ground floor of their house was furnished with five of the usual large four-poster wooden platforms, spread with bamboo mats ready for visiting women pilgrims to sleep upon. There was also a table and some stools, and visiting men pilgrims might be sent to them to be fed, though they must go to a monastery or the men's meditation compound to sleep. At the back of the room and up a step was the kitchen with the raised fireplace, to save the aged knees. All was scrupulously clean with food in wire safes and earthenware bins, and plates and cups on a rack.

These women came from a good family which supported them by supplying all they needed in the way of food and robes, and presumably had built their house, also. 'If a nun did not have a family to support her, what then?' I asked. She must go to her village twice a year at harvest times and get what she could by way of food, and such things as cotton which she could trade for matches, candles and the like. Out of the food the nuns received, whether from their families or bi-yearly visits to their families, they must provide a certain amount for the monks also, but this was a great privilege, and a little from each nun was no hardship. Of course the younger monks also went to the village for alms, and these nuns were of opinion that there was more food than was needed, so that some of it was given to old men, old nuns and invalids. This may have been so, but the fact remains that there was not enough to make it unnecessary for many nuns to go to their villages, but the injustice of this would not strike any who made the bi-yearly trek. It is hard for Westerners to

appreciate this privilege of giving, especially to monks, but it is basic in the Burmese outlook on life,

Cooking has always seemed to me a most unpleasant occupation and a most unprofitable way of spending time, but the senior nun in charge of cooking for the monks probably felt she was greatly privileged. All helped to supply food for the monks, but if a nun were poor her contribution might be only a dish of beans, the poor man's food, and to make sure the monks did not suffer in consequence, it was this nun's task to provide one dish of really good food, fish or fowl, no doubt. However, wealthy donors usually provided the rice and the food for the one really appetizing dish, and donors as well as pilgrims would usually provide the after-dinner delicacies and fruit.

However unattractive the servitude of the lives of these nuns may seem to the Western mind, there were 150 of them, and all perfectly free to leave any time they wished merely by reporting to the Registrar-monk. They were also free to leave temporarily by getting permission from the head nun if it were for a short time and from the Registrar if for a longer period. If you live in a community there must be rules, and the Mohnyin Rules in these matters were perfectly reasonable—as long as you accepted the fact that monks were masters. Besides, the Sayadaw was apparently very much beloved so that it was a delight to obey him. His portrait hung beside the Buddha shrine on the top storey which you reached up a steep narrow staircase, where even a short person was liable to bump her head! It was in the upper storey that these nuns lived, slept, meditated and kept their few simple belongings. They lovingly gave us prints of the Sayadaw's photo to take away.

It was a loving-kindness centre and one had to admit that there was an atmosphere of goodwill everywhere. 'But are there never quarrels among the younger nuns?' I asked. 'No, never! At the least suspicion of ill will, older nuns step in and smooth things over.' 'Does everyone work in perfect harmony and never disobey the rules?' Well, nearly always, but occasionally a punishment might be inflicted. The offender would have to fill the huge water pots or, if they were already full, she would have

to water the Bodhi Tree, and while she did this she must explain to the older nuns why she was doing it. What would happen, I wondered, if the offending nun were old and small and weak. But perhaps nuns of this calibre never did offend.

All the nuns' quarters were in excellent repair. How was this brought about? Were the repairs effected out of the lavish funds poured out for the Pagoda? Oh, dear, no! If a house had been provided by a donor, then the donor would repair it during his or her lifetime, or if the nun had money she would attend to the repairs herself, like our hostess, who was having a dog-proof fence put round the ground floor. If neither of these courses were open, she might apply to the Registrar to make money available from the General Maintenance Fund to which each nun usually contributed five kyats yearly.

Their dwelling was bare, brown, spotlessly clean, perfectly simple and yet provided all that was needed. They were simple, pure-minded and saintly, living by their faith and untroubled by problems that worry us intellectuals. 'Might they be arahants?' I asked Sarana. 'They might, who knows?' was her reply. They gave us an insight into life in a Burmese nunnery that perhaps no one outside Burma is aware of. But it must not be thought that there is any uniformity among nunneries, as there is among monasteries. At this, a fifteen days' noviciate was demanded, and if a woman were married or divorced very strict enquiries were made to make sure she had husband's and children's consent to join. On the day appointed for her ordination, relatives would give food to monks and to four older nuns. A monk would read the rules and warn her of the life she was undertaking. At some centres no noviciate was demanded, but others insisted that the postulant remain in lay attire and live at the nunnery for a longer or shorter period before ordination. The one visited in Rangoon, and a few others, insisted upon virginity. But all left their nuns as free as monks to take off the robes and return to the world. Despite this, nuns as a rule remain nuns, perhaps more often than monks remain monks, and I never heard of a nun who had unrobed herself.

Shortly after this interview, I attended the Sayadaw Agga Maha Pandita's bi-monthly sermon. The last time it had been at the full moon; this time it was at the new moon. An hour before sunset, he was wheeled to the Ordination Hall in an invalid's chair, and two laymen yogis, wearing russet-red meditation scarfs, assisted him to his seat. He, the ten monks and one boy-novice, occupied the front half of the hall, and about a hundred nuns and a few laywomen occupied the back half. Sarana and I were fairly late for I had mistaken the time and the back half of the hall was already packed. I do not know what happened to Sarana, but I was shoved forward to the front line of nuns, so that I had a dress-circle view of proceedings. The monks had mats to sit on, but the little boy-novice had only the floor—like the rest of us. One of the monks turned round and in what appeared to be a rather rude tone of voice (but it must again be borne in mind that Burmese voices are seldom soft and gentle) indicated the child's need to the nun nearest behind him. She at once presented the lad with her cotton shawl to sit on—so that she might acquire merit and probably she scolded herself for not having thought of it before.

The monks and a few laymen, who occupied the doorways, sat on their haunches; the women sat with feet sideways; and all held their hands prayer-wise. The proceedings commenced with the recitation in Pali by one of the monks of the 227 Vinaya rules, which embrace what is considered necessary for the outward good conduct of monks, from not killing to not reclining on sofas with a red cushion at either end. The monk who did the reciting had to be prompted several times during the three-quarters of an hour that the recitation lasted. I had ample time to survey the scene. In the middle front of the hall were two large Buddha statues on gold thrones studded with coloured glass. A row of candles in front vied with the masses of gold and silver, artificial flowers and spangled canopies, to do honour to the Blessed One, while a gorgeous peacock tapestry swung from the middle of the ceiling with a fluorescent strip nearby which was lit when the candles died down. Buddha statues also stood in niches at the side, one of which had a capital 'A' by way of ornament similar to one on the verandah of a hut in our

compound; it had no sacred significance, Sarana said. The Buddha statue facing me seemed to have an amused smile on his lips. He and I understood each other. 'Vain repetitions!' I could almost hear him saying. 'Rules and regulations are a counterfeit teaching. They come into being when the real teaching begins to wane. (Vide *Kindred Sayings*, II p. 131.) 'If these rules help them to conduct a community where there is peace and concord, let the rules remain.' The proceedings I was witnessing were utterly alien to my intellectual beliefs and my upbringing, and yet I was strangely at home.

At 5.30 p.m. the recitation ended. The Sayadaw Agga Maha Pandita was hoisted on to a chair by laymen yogi, everyone 'paid respect', the monks relaxed, and so did everyone else, lay people who had been outside squeezed into the hail and we all turned towards the preacher. There was neither need nor room for me to move, so I dutifully continued to hold my hands prayer-wise, and when the legs got stiff I meditated upon phyit-pyet, coming-to-be, ceasing-to-be, and the pain departed. I thought this was not a bad effort for a Westerner, for the Sayadaw spoke for an hour. His lips were thin as a European's, and his voice bespoke a vigour that was also European, and that despite his great age and bodily infirmity. He seemed in excellent spirits and showed, I think, a sense of humour. Sarana told me afterwards that he talked about everyday matters such as the need for peace and concord and the practice of meditation. He turned towards the nuns with a most affectionate look and I got the impression that he was far fonder of his nuns than of his brother monks—as a country squire might be far fonder of his dogs than of his human relatives!

After the sermon ended, bottles of soft drinks were served to the monks and the laymen yogi got what the monks left over. The Sayadaw turned to me and asked if I had found peace. I was shoved closer to him while he asked a few more questions before he was finally helped out to the wheelchair.

As we emerged from the hall a bright-eyed little girl-novice handed Sarana and me our sandals. I had observed her small intelligent face during the proceedings and had felt sad that her

fine intellect would never know anything except the Abhidhamma. The girls had only two hours' tuition each day for this was not a learning centre. They were taught to read and write Burmese; after that, they learned various Pali sutras by heart, and later on they were taught to translate them. The Abhidhamma and Pali grammar came last. Even Sarana seemed to think there was some special magic about Pali. Most of these little girls would remain here for life though they were perfectly free to leave. It was strange to look around on these monks and nuns, with whom in the deepest things I felt much akin, and know that apart from their very limited acquaintance with some of the Pali Texts, we had absolutely no knowledge in common. Probably they took it for granted that the sun went round the earth, that is, if such worldly matters ever entered their heads. How long would they remain thus cut off from the world, how long rest in their idyllic peace, simplicity and plenty? Was the fate of Tibet in store for them also?

At my request, Sarana next lined up an interview with one of the older monks. She chose one who had been in Rangoon and therefore presumably had a smattering of worldly, as well as sacred, knowledge. When we arrived he was seated on a low armchair with his feet on the floor, but part way through the interview he tucked them up beneath him—as long as he was seated above his audience, why should he not be comfortable if he could? I understood; I had done the same myself. If you would understand Burmese monks, you must become a monk yourself—not literally as some Westerners do by donning the yellow robes for a few months, or even years, but by putting yourself inside the mind of this or that yellow-robed one, and that is what I tried to do as questions passed to him through Sarana, he replied.

At his feet sat a layman yogi with a russet-red meditation scarf. He looked like a faithful watchdog guarding his master, and that indeed was very much his role, the chaperon required by the Vinaya rules whenever a monk talks with a woman or with several women. I thought back in horror to an interview with a

monk in Sydney, when the hostess, having ushered me into his presence, went out, closed the door behind her and left us completely alone! What would this russet-robed one have thought?

He told us that this being a meditation centre, the monks meditated ceaselessly when not actually eating, sleeping or delivering Dhamma discourse. Any monk could join them, but he must know Pali and the Vinaya rules before he came, for not being a learning community, he could not, as is usual, learn after he came. For the same reason they had no boy-novices—the lad who sat on the nun's shawl the night before was a visitor. Besides, boy-novices would be playful and run about and make a noise. The usual work done by boy-novices, that of cooking for visitors and looking after the monks, was here done by nuns and male yogis. There were fifteen laymen yogis to look after the ten monks, and when their services were not required they too would meditate. Their work was without pay, and solely to acquire merit—presumably they did not know Pali or they would have become monks. Money donated to monks was taken by these yogis. But gifts of other than money, unless made of gold or silver, monks could themselves accept, even personal gifts, such as a watch (a platinum watch, I imagine, would not be taboo!). Ornaments for altars and shrines the monks could also handle themselves so long as not made of gold or silver. Money, which a monk did not need for his own requirements, he could direct to be given to another.

Although the monks meditated ceaselessly, he did not know of any who had acquired supernormal powers, although undoubtedly meditation could lead to such powers, even though it was Vipassana meditation which aims at insight, not at miracles.

I then brought up the matter of the armed guard. Why did a loving-kindness centre need an armed guard? It didn't. Neither the Pagoda nor the monks (he did not mention the nuns) needed any protection. They themselves feared nothing. The Government had put the armed guard there to protect pilgrims who often came with money and jewellery. The monks were not

responsible for what the Government did. As for loving-kindness and dogs, well of course they had loving-kindness for all sentient beings; parents had loving-kindness for their children, but that did not prevent them from beating their children if they misbehaved, and loving-kindness for dogs did not prevent you beating them. I was tempted to comment that if a parent starved his child and beat it for stealing food he would probably be charged before the court. However, I was here to understand the monk's point of view and not put forward my own.

The light was failing and taking notes was not easy. Neither low table nor candle were provided here as everywhere else; here I was not an honoured guest; I was only a female. So I found it hard to grasp what he now said about the Vipassana technique. However, I learned there was no initiation ceremony, nor any individual help after the first interview, although it was possible to make an appointment with a monk if any special difficulty were encountered. Yogis started by meditation on loving-kindness and then, as at Maha Bodhi, deliberately switched over to phyit-pyet, seeing all within the body and mind as ceaselessly coming and going, only the mental and physical, no permanent entity, no 'I', no 'mine', no 'me' and no young girl and no old woman ('and no monk', I am afraid I added facetiously to myself), all were the same, only physical and mental, nama rupa, all subject to change, decay, death and rebirth. He would have liked to have treated me to the customary two-hour sermon, but listening to an abstruse subject through an interpreter when you cannot take notes was beyond me, and I had two more questions to ask. He probably thought I was missing an invaluable chance to find deliverance. Reluctantly he stopped his sermon and answered my last questions.

Would an ordinary monk have any knowledge outside the Pali Scriptures? The answer was, 'No, not unless he had been to a secular school, or had joined the Order late in life or had been to the Buddhist Missionary College in Rangoon.' He had already told me no woman might preach in the Dhamma Hall. I now sprang my final question. I had come a long way to visit this pagoda. No Westerner had visited it before. My countrymen would rejoice if they could see pictures of its wonders. Might I

climb the spiral staircase to the top of the tower to take some pictures of it. He tried to evade my question. No one, either man or woman, who had an impure heart, might climb above sacred relics. I think he admitted that women besides men might have pure hearts, and that perhaps even mine was pure, but then he fell back on Burmese custom which prohibits women from climbing above sacred relics, so that was that!

As we walked away I asked Sarana whether she would like to be a monk. That particular monk, surrounded by everything he wanted and waited upon hand and foot, no, but a monk, yes, for then she could depart into the forest to meditate—like nuns did in the Buddha's day, I might have added, but it would not have been material, for they do not do that now, even though they are not members of the Order, nor governed by any rules they do not wish.

Long practice as a solicitor who tries to get inside his clients' minds to find their needs and help them seemed to have failed. I felt I had never really made contact with that monk. He was of a class apart, completely secure in his own importance and authority, so secure that he had none of the prickly egoism that comes of a certainty of superiority coupled with a knowledge that others are less certain of it. I am sure he had no ill will towards anything or anybody. How could it be otherwise when his constant thought and his once-in-ten-days' sermon were directed towards goodwill. He was utterly certain of himself; utterly certain that he had fulfilled the letter of the law as set out in the Scriptures, and that others looked to him as their superior. Were the Scribes and Pharisees like him? Might it be that the hard things said of them in the Gospels blinds us to the possibility that they were good and kindly people when no one thwarted them? But the sin against the Holy Spirit, the one deadly sin that cannot be forgiven, is egoism, the failure to find in actual experience that we are without self, and therefore superior to no one. Monks such as this receive admiration, service and obedience on the earthly plane and verily they have their reward. And then I thought again of those humble saintly old ladies in the russet robes, tending the sick and cooking for pilgrims and happy in their unpretentious service.

That night there was no sleepiness to interrupt meditation, and a strange peace brought complete contentment. After breakfast I knew that the purpose of coming to Mohnyin had been fulfilled. I had squeezed the orange dry, although only three weeks had gone, instead of the four intended. I sought out Sarana. 'Let's go back tomorrow.' No sooner said than organized, for Sarana is a born organizer.

It was when the farewell was organized (after signing off with the Registrar, so to speak) that I regretted for the first time the Bank's failure to honour the letter of credit, for the donations I could afford to make to the nuns were not as large as I could have wished. I 'paid respect' to the head nun, and all the rest 'paid respect' to me as their senior, and then we got up into the jeep which the head nun's family had sent for the honoured guest, so I was deprived of the experience of travelling in the pilgrims' bus to Monywa.

The half hour's drive took us past many prosperous villages with neat bamboo cottages, tobacco fields, toddy palms, a weaving school, sheds where dressed timber, bamboo poles and roofing material were tidily stacked. We also passed a large lake which perhaps provided the fish in lieu of meat for the loving-kindness centre. A suspiciously smelly basket at my feet made me a little apprehensive lest some of the same fish should be our companion back to Maha Bodhi, but of course a disciple of the Buddha will not be affected by smells, pleasant or unpleasant, and of course through Vipassana meditation, one knows there is only a sense organ, the object of the sense and consciousness connecting, and no 'I' to smell anything.

We drove through Monywa town and then through Ledi Sayadaw Monastery to Ledi Sayadaw Nunnery. But though Ledi Sayadaw was the learned monk who originated the Maha Bodhi method of meditation, neither monastery nor nunnery were for meditation. They were learning centres. Our coming had been announced beforehand and nun novices met us and took us to pay respect to the Mother Superior, a real Mother Superior this time, not an underling of monks. Indeed the only connection with the monastery was the privilege of donating food to it once

a year, and also, should their own lecturer in Abhidhamma be absent or ill, of listening to the monks' lecturer—from behind a curtain! The nuns in twos, threes or fours, had their own cottages, but there was a brand new two-storey building, brick and concrete on the ground floor and bamboo and timber for the upper storey and this was allocated to me. Of course there was no furniture on the polished floor except some bamboo mats. Monasteries and nunneries fulfil the same function as mediaeval European monasteries in providing hospitality for travellers who have no relatives or friends or friends' friends in the place they are visiting. In the case of monasteries the boy novices will cook for the guests and there is always a store of food provided by donors.

Sarana went off with the other nuns to do the sights of the small town, while I sat cross-legged on my sleeping bag and tried to meditate. The faint din of the town surrounded the little compound as well as the noise of a pumping engine, but the dogs appeared reasonably well cared for and therefore well behaved; perhaps this was one of the places where Ne Win's ruthless military officers had sent unwanted dogs to their next incarnation! Outwardly it was far more peaceful than Mohnyin, but there was not that strange wave of peace that swept out to meet you when you opened the door of the meditation compound at Mohnyin, and meditation is not as easy when no one near you is attempting to still the thoughts. I should like to have roamed around the garden and I was sure that the dogs which had not even barked were perfectly friendly and not suffering from rabies. But Sarana had detailed a nun to guard me should I venture forth, and she had dogged my every step when I had taken a few photos. So I resigned myself to looking through the glassless, barred windows at the bananas, paw paws, mangoes and neem trees, and beyond them to the road outside where men and women passed on their bikes—the men putting their leg over the front like the women when they mounted because of the impediment of skirts. Girls passed with huge baskets on their heads and at sundown with heavy earthenware pots of water. Little boys ran about stark naked, but little girls were always

decently clothed. Most of the cottages were of bamboo with the kitchen distinguished by its double roof.

Like the Lady of Shallot I had several times exhausted what was to be seen from my prison house of kindness, when Sarana returned and a host of nuns came to visit the stranger. I promptly got out my notebook like a newspaper reporter, and this is what I learned from the Abhidhamma lecturer, the nun who had been assigned the job of dogging my footsteps should I venture forth.

'There are thirty-five nuns as well as the Mother Superior. Two of them are Abhidhamma lecturers. Most of the others are students. They occupy seven cottages and all pay respect to the Mother Superior. At 4 a.m. we must be up, not for meditation, but for prayers. We meet in assembly, take the Refuges and Precepts, light candles and place offerings before the Buddha statue. We then chant three out of ten prescribed sutras, the ten being Mangala, Metta, Ratana (Three Jewels), Khandha, Mora, Dazeka, Artanatiya, Bhuzin, Popepana and Angulimala (the last is about the ex-robber saint who helped a woman in difficult childbirth). The chanting takes about an hour, and at the conclusion the gong-bell is rung and dogs howl.' (I have watched dogs howling. It is simply ludicrous to see them lift their noses into the air and howl! howl! howl! to the Bells! Bells! Bells! Sarana used to say they were saying 'Sadhu! Sadhu! Well done! Blessings be upon you !' But Sarana has a very pure mind. To my impure mind it seemed rather as if they were calling down curses upon us.)

The Abhidhamma lecturer continued, 'The same prayers are said at 6 p.m. or earlier in winter. During the day five hours are devoted to learning with the lecturer and the rest of the spare time to private study. As we do not take girls under twelve, they can all read and write Burmese and therefore start at once with Pali. We begin with the Abhidhamma, then the Vinaya, and lastly the Sutta Pitaka, or discourses' (that is to say the earliest records of the Buddha's teaching are considered the least important). 'A student who has completed all her studies will know all the Pali texts including the Commentaries.' Of course mundane knowledge did not figure in the curriculum, although

the lecturer herself knew where Australia was because she had seen it on a wall map. She had sat for the Government examinations in Pali, and so would all the students who completed their course. The admission of women to these public examinations in Pali was one of U Nu's reforms. The British did not presume to interfere with the religion of the country, and so left the exclusion of women as they had found it.

'Sabbath days are holidays, except that students sit for an examination on the work they have done during the week. They also listen to a sermon from the Mother Superior. But apart from these things they are free to visit friends and be visited.

'Twice a week, thirty-two out of the thirty-six nuns go with trays on their heads to the village for alms. The other four are supported by their relatives. Also, twice a year at harvest times, they go to their villages for food and stores for the next six months. We do not find our life hard. We are a happy family. True, there are sometimes little quarrels, but the Mother Superior always settles them. And there is no time for personal affection or jealousy among nuns.'

Night was falling and a candle had been lit. In the midst of the pale robes its light caught the sparkle of jewels. They were those of the little lay girl from a distant village who lived with her nun auntie so that she could attend the government school. Certainly there is never any hard and fast rule governing the lives of nuns. A wealthy Chinese nun's father had built a large concrete house for her, and she was not learning, she was only reading, writing and meditating, and ten of the older nuns did not study either.

We had rice-gruel at 5 a.m. next morning—how simple is travelling when you do not have to eat after 10.30 a.m. Then the jeep again obliged and deposited us at the station in darkness. A few people were trying to eat by candlelight and there was a long time to wait before the ticket window opened and I prepared to experiment buying tickets without a knowledge of Burmese, but it turned out that the attendant was one of the few Burmese in

out-of-the-way places who knew English perfectly well. Even had there been no money-shortage I had determined to travel home ‘ordinary class’, but I had had to keep it a secret from U Aye Bo. Travelling lower class is far more interesting; its only disadvantage is that people do not understand when you want to take photos from the opposite side of the carriage.

The seats were hard and it was distinctly chilly when the train left and distinctly hot when the sun streamed in four hours later. I put something soft on the seat, tucked my legs up like the Mohnyin monk and was perfectly comfortable. The companionable basket with the questionable perfume occupied the seat beside me! But of course a disciple of the Buddha has no preference for smells pleasant or unpleasant, and there is only a sense organ and the object of the sense and consciousness connecting them. Although there had been a mad rush to get on the train, there was plenty of room, and Sarana told me that main stations do not issue more tickets than the train can carry passengers. However, more got on at intermediate stations and I saw some breaking the rules that men and women may not sit together nor monks sit within two and a half feet of a woman. At Mohnyin station some nuns boarded the train to go to their villages for food supplies.

The country which had seemed uninteresting from the air turned out to be teeming with interest. True, villages were separated by huge distances and I shuddered to think of the waste of time spent in lumbering bullock waggons when the farming family visited its outlying fields for the planting, weeding and harvesting. The country had seemed arid from the air, but it grew crops of cotton, tobacco, sesame, corn, ground nuts, wheat and beans, and when we reached the irrigation channels constructed by ancient Burmese Kings, the fields were emerald green with young rice seedlings.

At every station official food-vendors in dark blue aprons carried colourful edibles on trays on their heads, and when business began to fail squatted down on the railway lines to wait for the next train.

And then the sacred Sagaing Hills came into sight with their sparkling white and gold pagodas and we drew into Arakan Station, a seat of Buddhist learning where yellow-robed ones strolled about with important looking books under their arms.

At Mandalay four car-loads of yogis drove up to meet us. 'It's like the welcome to the prodigal son,' I said. It was good to have a companion who knew who the prodigal son was. I had come to take Sarana's kindness so much for granted that perhaps it is not until I write this that I fully realize how wonderful it was to have as my companion, not merely perhaps the only Burmese nun who speaks English, and has had a Christian education, but one so completely self-effacing that whatever I wanted she helped me to do—except, of course, go alone into villages among dogs of doubtful character!

All the yogis at Maha Bodhi gathered at Daw Nyunt's verandah when we sat down to lunch, and lo and behold, there was the companionable basket at my side once more! The fish within it were kind Einda's gift to the Maha Bodhi yogis.

U Thein asked if I would like to live in the lonely hermitage on the outskirts of the compound. It had been occupied by a merchant yogi who had spent some hours each day in cultivating fruit trees and vegetables. He had had to leave because his wife had become ill and he had to attend to her business for her. It was a five minutes' walk from the kitchen to the hermitage, but the cook and his wife and one of the women yogis offered to bring meals over to me, and one of the nuns asked to acquire merit by cooking one dish for me each day. And so here was I, being just as much spoiled as the Mohnyin monks, and people regarding it as nearly as meritorious to spoil me as to spoil them. And to crown everything Daw Nyunt said I must pay nothing for my board. This was my home!

CHAPTER TEN

THE HERMIT

The hermitage which was to be protector of silence as well as dwelling for the remaining five weeks, was quite unlike the meditation huts. It was built of concrete with an asbestos fibro roof and consisted of one very large room, a shrine room, a concrete cubicle for washing and a smaller one for a latrine not yet connected with its septic tank. It had its own private moat as well as the recently-planted vegetables and fruit trees. Every second or third afternoon an old man yogi used to come over to water the garden, drawing the water from the moat by means of a bucket at the end of a rope. I wondered how long it would take to use up all the moat, for towards the end the muddy banks got uncomfortably wide, and though water was turned from the irrigation channels into the main moat, it did not reach as far as this. Meantime, the water-snakes meandered lazily along peeping in at various holes and then swimming on in perfectly relaxed rhythm. There were land-snakes too; one about eight feet long flashed right across the vegetable garden. But snakes, all except cobras, are of good omen, and cobras confined their attentions to the College grounds; they never came to Maha Bodhi. 'And if one of them did come to Maha Bodhi, what would you do?' 'Give it loving-kindness and let it go,' replied U Thein.

The moat also attracted an occasional dazzling blue and black kingfisher. He would skim along the top of the water like a brilliant jewel, make a sudden dive and then sweep back and sit saucily on the rail of the bridge displaying his gorgeous bronze breast and a tiny fish in his beak.

The first day dawned with a lovely opal mist and a heavy dew which dripped off the banana leaves like rain. All was wonderfully peaceful and the radiance of loving-kindness seemed lovelier than the beauty of the dawn. But meditation did not succeed very well and then one of the 'Officers' who came to Maha Bodhi on Sundays walked across to my retreat to 'instruct' me. The first fortnight was definitely to be one of complete silence so far as English-speaking visitors were concerned, but the Officer's zeal was such that he would not take 'no' for an answer. One can understand how a learned monk, who knows the Pali texts, considers he is able to instruct the Westerner in the Buddha's teaching, even though he knows nothing of any other religion and nothing even of other forms of his own. But Buddhist laymen who do not know Pali and have not even read their Scriptures are equally certain that the Westerner needs their assistance.

After I had positively refused to be drawn into conversation with this Officer by reason of a vow of silence, he at length reluctantly departed, and left me slightly annoyed at his disturbance of my peace, though of course I could see it was only Mara, the personification of ego, trying to prevent meditation and succeeding only too well. After that, meditation settled down satisfactorily and the body ran through nearly all the painful sensations listed in the booklet of instructions together with a new one of my own, the former shortage of breath and pain near the heart as if climbing a mountain too quickly—'Most satisfactory!' said U Thein, when the matter was reported.

To save me from the disturbance of having to meet people, U Thein then started coming over to me instead of the reverse, but after that there was little to tell, and he himself was going to Rangoon for some days so that the solitude would be even more unbroken.

Things soon settled down into a routine, from rising about 2 a.m. to sleeping about 8.30 or 9 p.m. Tiny brown ants became rather a pest and I shifted my sleeping bag on to the hard wood bed in the shrine room because its feet stood in tins that could be

filled with water. It was also pleasanter, for I could see the moonlit garden through glassless windows on three sides. At 2 a.m. the Great Bear flamed through the window to the north and the paler Southern Cross twinkled through the window to the south. At 4 a.m. the huge temple bell boomed forth sending loving-kindness to the yogis, and the new green fluorescent light above the reconstructed Dhamma Hall would vie with the moonlight. later on I used to take my sleeping bag outside at this hour and meditate either on the bridge or on the porch, though the mosquitoes were somewhat attentive. Last visit there had been very few mosquitoes except at sunset, but this time the only period free from them was just before dawn, the quietest hour of the day, whose solemnity recalled the dawn in a high alpine hut among snow peaks when all is frozen and no avalanche breaks the stillness. Across the rice fields the Maymyu Hills were outlined against the paling sky and almost they might have been great peaks away over a valley filled with mist. Unlike the birds around my bushland home in Australia, the birds at Maha Bodhi did not welcome the first rays of light, and it was not until after dawn that they arose and started twittering under the eaves where they were busy building nests. At six o'clock the cook's figure would emerge out of the grey mist with a tray of rice-gruel, hot milk, toast and banana, and if there was anything to tell Sarana he would take back a chit.

It was still cold after breakfast, but the sun warmed rapidly, and the pleasantest spot for meditation was on one of the bridges over the moat shadowed by trees reflected in the water, and stirred by faint breezes. Those shadows were never still, always changing, always passing on; then a sudden start as a stronger breeze stirred an unexpected shadow seen out of the corner of the eye—all phantasms, which came and went like everything of earth and everything within the mind and body—phyit-pyet.

At ten the cook's wife—the cook couple were not the same as the cook couple of the previous visit—and the woman I came to know later as the Red Dragon Yogi, because she had learned meditation at the Red Dragon Centre, came over the rice fields with trays on their heads and a far too elaborate lunch was spread on a low table. A little before noon I ventured through the

workmen and building operations to my former bathroom that had a door! And then followed the long afternoon, sometimes outside and sometimes in, and the very welcome lime juice at 5 p.m. After U Thein's return and the fortnight's silence had ended, I used to go over to him at 7 p.m. by which time all the 'officers' and English-speaking people had departed. The cook, who guarded me like a princess would call peremptorily, 'Sayalay! Sayalay!' and Sarana would obediently come forth. The cook would then listen in to the interview from just outside the verandah, for he had once meditated himself for ten days. 'When the interview ended he would shepherd me with a torch, and a stick which he banged against all the protruding timber and tools, to the bridge over the moat, but I then insisted I could make my way over the rice fields alone.

One reason I had been loath to return to Maha Bodhi had been the memory of the last Independence Day celebrations. But this year there was only the broadcast or gramophone with loudspeaker of a service about 4 a.m.—I suppose it was a sermon, not a political harangue, for I caught the word 'Dukkha'. Then all was peaceful except for the workmen who ceased not from their labours either on public holidays or Sabbaths or Sundays. They worked from about 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and one of the cottages they were building was quite close to the hermitage. It was large and raised on stilts, and had one main room, two small rooms and a little verandah.

There were other large cottages visible but mostly the view from the hermitage was of the backs of the little huts, ever so many of them. It was hard to picture them all full during Lent, the four months of the rains, when there were four sittings for meals, two for men and two for women. Usually the men would choose the little huts, but the women liked to sleep overnight in a party in one of the large cottages. I was told that occasionally a party would bring its own cook or one of the women would spend an hour a day cooking, but time was begrudged for cooking, and the great advantage of the organization of the Centre was that meals were provided at a low cost. Strict celibacy was, of course, insisted upon for all at the Centre except

the cook couple, and the sleeping quarters were strictly separate for men and women.

Meditation was beginning to settle into an even rhythm when, according to arrangement, U Sein Maung came to take me to see whether the Bank had at last got some money for me. It had not. The money shortage did not worry me very much, for I had a few travellers' cheques not yet cashed. But the goddess of efficiency raised her ugly head and because of living in complete solitude the mood of irritation was irrationally heightened. That appears to be a characteristic of a period of isolation. I had often noticed the same thing during the annual week spent camping alone in Australia. There is no distraction to prevent moods of depression and moods of elation from having full sway. It gives the naturally solitary person some inkling of the terrors that must assail the naturally gregarious person when forced into solitary confinement; for such a one, physical torture would be far preferable. On re-reading my journal it seems incredible that this and other moods should have caused such disturbances. Meditation at such times, as the Buddha said, is like trying to light a fire with damp wood. The ceaseless repetition of Lead Kindly Light will ultimately take effect, but in the meantime the only sane thing to do is to remember that mankind has always been able to endure, and that this particular specimen can do as others have done. Always these black moods are succeeded by moods of peacefulness and joy, and in this case there were three hours of blissful absorption with the phyit-pyet flowing like a gentle stream and mind and body merged and one with it, and two visions at intervals. But these blissful experiences are far more dangerous, because it is more difficult to stand aside and be detached from joy than from pain. Both are only moods and must be transcended. Possibly U Thein's wisdom might have shortened the period it took to learn these things, but he was away, and before he returned things were well into focus again. One more complex or 'self' had been slain. That is the reason why the Buddha emphasized the need for solitude. If there are outward distractions the black mood disappears fairly quickly, but the complex that gave rise to it is still there, and the pain to which it gives birth will return again and again each time there is

the appropriate stimulous. In solitude, however, the complex has a chance of being rooted out completely, and then the pain arising from it will never return.

Between the periods of successful and unsuccessful meditation I watched the village life outside the six- or seven-foot high barbed-wire fence, which had recently been erected around the newly-acquired addition to the Maha Bodhi compound. I am rather adept at getting under barbed-wire fences, but I should not like to have tackled that one. This meant that there was no danger from petty thieves. Outside that fence the peasants would pass by, the girls carrying baskets on their heads, and sometimes the men also. Often the baby was carried by the man, and he did not always walk in front, as tradition says he should. Occasionally a very modern boy and girl student would walk side by side. Then there would be herds of goats being driven to slaughter and bullock waggons laden with hay. At the back of the hermitage lay the road along which yellow-robed ones would go for alms between eight and nine in the morning. One of them always went into the nearest house for a cup of tea, and having drunk would pass through the back entrance and return to the phongyi-khaung with its fretwork eaves and leaning roof, which reminded of 'the falling house that never falls'. And then below in the water those ceaseless rippling shadows, ripple following ripple as the moods of depression followed those of elation—mostly the former ! —phyit-pyet, coming-going, and that solid earth also only as rippling shadows, less substantial perhaps than the banana fronds reflected in the stream, and the only reality that Pure White Light. This was all pleasantly poetical, but it did nothing to alter the fact that time was flying and very little progress made.

When U Thein finally returned the immediate problem had solved itself, as has been said, and there was only an abstract discussion on the difficulty of the person with a bright busy brain compared with the ease with which an unlearned peasant could learn to still his thoughts. Why could I not meditate upon the brain instead of the body or the heart, and find phyit-pyet in the silly old brain? I had put the same question two years before and

had been told it would only lead to a headache. Now he said that if I were prepared for the headache, it might be a good idea.

So I started focusing attention on phyit-pyet, particles ceaselessly coming and going, on that spot of the head which had been in the most acute pain some five to ten years before. It was successful. Concentration was easier, and the pain only moderate, fading away altogether in a day or so. I later heard that this is in fact the method adopted at a small centre in Maymyu. But this concentration on one spot was very strenuous. It seemed like a deliberate attempt to raise the whole being to another vibrational level, and to have no connection with the Quaker's 'centering on God' or with the Catholic's 'mental prayer', and I began to understand why Daw Nyunt had to give up meditation on becoming ill. When straying thoughts came into consciousness I was unable to decide whether I was working too strenuously or not strenuously enough, and asked U Thein. He replied that straying thoughts indicated the need for extra strenuous effort for perhaps five minutes. But on looking back over this period I am not satisfied he was right. This was the first time that he had met the average Westerner's tendency to strive too ardently and to seek for results instead of leaving the result to the natural course of the Law of one's being.

A very interesting physical symptom developed from this over-strain. The sinews at the back of the right leg suddenly tightened, so that it was impossible to grasp the toes with the hands and touch the head at the same time to the knee of the outstretched leg, one of the easiest yoga exercises for one in training. When the matter was reported to U Thein he said it was due to the alternation of very successful and very unsuccessful concentration. But this drastic swing from one extreme to the other was itself obviously due to overstrain and failure to let the psychic processes grow naturally.

It was the same over-enthusiasm which took me out on to the bridge over the moat to meditate in the dewy hours before dawn. The first time the cook arrived with breakfast he was absolutely horrified and poor Sarana was even more shocked. That was how one caught one's death of cold. But as it transpired it was she,

not the moonlight meditator, who contracted a very bad cold indeed, and she slept and meditated with doors and windows tightly closed.

The officer who was so zealous for my salvation made another attempt to help me. He wanted me to meet an American nun who was extremely successful in meditation and who was living at a distant place. He did not seem to understand that the way to learn meditation is not to talk with successful meditators but to practice oneself.

A few days after U Thein's return from Rangoon there was to be the second initiation ceremony for the benefit of two newcomers, and I asked to attend it also, hoping once again for the stimulation of meditating with experienced meditators. The new Dhamma Hall was wide instead of long, and this time no curtain was drawn between the men who sat in front and the women behind. Daw Nyunt was not now among the experienced women meditators, for she had been ill again, and again had had to give up meditation. Gorgeous silk mats were given to the three monks who sat with an old man and a novice monk in front. I had brought a woolly shawl, and U Thein was most careful to see that I had a pillar against which to lean the back.

For the first hour there was complete absorption; all I had to do was to look passively at the ceaselessly changing atoms within the brain. But at the end of the hour the body got unaccountably painful. I could have moved and ended the pain, but once again the persistency of the Westerner refused to give in—after all, women in childbirth or women having superfluous hairs removed suffered worse agony than this for a lesser reason. But every muscle of the body seemed to be in agony, even those of the hands resting gently upon each other. The pain began to ease a little before the two hours were up, but it was the most excruciating period I have ever sat through. Was it a mistake to 'stick it out'? U Thein said I had done the right thing. But I still do not know. And right or wrong, that highly successful period of absorption was, of course, followed by one when no concentration at all was possible.

As I followed the experienced meditators out at 3 p.m., one of the monks held the door for a fraction of a second and stopped to look back. 'Nice, polite young man,' I said to myself, 'holding the door for the next to come.' But of course he was doing nothing of the sort. It was merely idle curiosity to see the white yogi. No man, least of all a monk, would dream of holding the door for a woman. I often wondered whether a monk, seeing a woman drowning would or would not forget the Vinaya Rules and jump in to save her.

Before leaving, I tried to explain to U Thein the tense strained state of mind of the average Westerner with his anxiety and worry, and I clenched my fists and put on a frown to make the matter clearer; I went on to suggest that for us relaxation is the first essential and that perhaps examination of dreams might bring the subconscious into consciousness and so resolve conflicts. He had obviously not the faintest idea what I was talking about. Burmese people were always relaxed; the trouble was that they did not strive earnestly enough, and inner conflict was apparently something he had never come across in all the thousands of meditators whom he had known. The method taught at Maha Bodhi appears to be eminently suitable for Westerners who accept the findings of science as gospel. But at the same time, they will not get far unless the importance of preliminary relaxation is stressed and also the need to bring hidden conflicts into the light of consciousness. Finally, it cannot be too often stressed that the end to be achieved is not in the meditator's control, and that his work is merely to practise, and neither to expect success nor dislike failure. Had the need for these things been on the noticeboard of the Rules, along with the need for remembering all things are transient, the weeks at Maha Bodhi on this visit would have been easier.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MAHA BODHI MEDITATORS

At the end of a fortnight I emerged from strict seclusion to the extent of going over the Centre for lunch at 10 a.m. I found the whole compound a hive of industry. Workmen swarmed everywhere, new buildings were being put up and old ones repaired or rebuilt. Chief among the new buildings was a magnificent Dhamma Hall in the style of Mohnyin architecture with the same russet-red colouring. For the moment its completion was held up because the Government or the Army had commandeered all the country's available nails. When it was finished, both the Instructor and the Dhamma Preacher would occupy rooms on either side of the shrine. This magnificent structure had been made possible through the generosity of a wealthy merchant lady, whose munificence would be enshrined forever on two marble slabs which were only awaiting the nails before being erected. I photographed her cogitating over a huge cigar as to how next to spend her money. She apparently decided on an artificial Bodhi Tree on one side of the shrine with another Buddha statue beneath it. She was typical of the wealthy Burmese who live frugally to expend money prolifically on religious objects to acquire merit to distribute to others.

Second among the new buildings was a dining hail, or at least the trenches for its foundations. The old dining shed had been demolished while I was in seclusion and when I emerged there was only the rubble left and women labourers carrying the bricks on their heads and cleaning them. 'They are not allowed to carry more than ten or twelve,' said the contractor. I don't think Burmese bricks are quite as heavy as ours, so perhaps the head-

load was not more than 70 to 90 lb! They were paid two kyats a day; the more skilled men labourers got three kyats and the 'mason' (bricklayer, I suppose) got five kyats. The donor of the new dining hall was a man merchant; he had come on the Sabbath to meditate; the foundation stones had not been laid and he was standing among the rubble dressed in a shabby European coat.

That evening when I arrived at Daw Nyunt's cottage for the interview with U Thein she was poring over a tabulated chart. 'Eight o'clock tomorrow is the time the astrologers have fixed for laying the foundation stones,' she was saying. 'Being a meditator, I don't hold with calling astrologers in,' said U Thein, 'but it is the Burmese custom.' The next morning at 8 a.m. seven foundation stones were laid, and the proper incantations said over them and candles duly lit. I did not attend the ceremony, for meditation seemed more important, so I may not have got the matter quite correctly, but correctly enough to show that despite the Buddha's condemnation of the 'low art' of casting horoscopes and choosing lucky days, the Burmese do so as blithely as they did before Buddhism spread to Burma. Every child has his horoscope cast and his name chosen accordingly, and it is remarkable how well the names fit. The objection to astrology is not that it is not a science, but that it is a waste of time in the eyes of those who seek in actual experience what is Beyond time and space, a waste of time because it is concerned only with things within time and space and therefore with things transient and fraught with suffering.

Despite all this it has been in continual use throughout Burmese history and, because it was taken so seriously, on at least two occasions it led to alterations in the calendar. Kings, who did not like the disasters astrologers foretold, calmly cut huge slices out of the calendar. They succeeded in bamboozling historians, but they did not succeed in averting the disasters, as Dr Soni has painstakingly found out and recorded in his *Burmese Era*.

U Thein was so averse to courting the supernatural that though he tolerated the astrologer's help in laying foundation

stones, he would have nothing to do with it in meditation and not even for the purpose of reading the thoughts of his yogis-in-training. Indeed, it was a little disconcerting to find that no matter how hard I looked at him in an endeavour to understand what was in his mind, he never looked at me, but always spoke through Sarana and looked only at her. Probing into another's thoughts was among the miraculous powers the Buddha did not approve of, and Vipassana meditation leaves the attainment of such powers strictly aside to pursue the straight path to insight and wisdom, but as I see it this has nothing to do with trying to understand without words what someone else is saying to you, as a mother will understand her child's needs before he speaks.

U Thein's refusal to try and make any contact with my mind, except through Sarana's words, did not prevent me from finding an underlying unity of thought. I asked him how it was that some people who were skilled in meditation were yet puffed up with pride and sell-importance and in the habit of disparaging others. He did not see how this could be, if a person had really gained Vipassana insight. But he admitted that he himself had avoided pride only by ceaselessly being on the watch and checking himself. Loving-kindness and self-effacement were the fruits of Vipassana insight. He did not see how anyone who practised could ever be a soldier; he would run away sooner than kill anyone. He skilfully evaded my question as to whether the large centre at Rangoon did not make a mistake by not including loving-kindness in its technique. Of course one must always commence meditation with radiation of love; if the yogi were only at the Samadhi stage he should devote a full five minutes of this, he said.

I then asked him what he would do if he heard that robbers or bandits were coming to the Centre. Would he call the police? His reply was that he would do nothing except send them thoughts of loving-kindness. And then he and Daw Nyunt recalled what had actually happened soon after the Centre was started when times were troubled and lawlessness rampant. Unpleasant characters prowled around Mandalay and one of these handed one of the yogis a letter for U Thein. It contained a demand for money. He conferred with Daw Nyunt and the Preacher of the Dhamma and

they left the answer to him. He replied, 'As you know, I have given away all my worldly wealth. All I possess is loving-kindness and that I give you freely.' No more was heard. But the unpleasant characters continued to prowl about and Daw Nyunt, as the custodian of the money, used to sleep in a different hut each night. The yogis-in-training began to get nervous and gradually they left. The permanent yogis had no fear, but there was then no longer any reason for their presence at the Centre, for they are there not so much for their own sake as to help the learners. In the end U Thein sent them all back to their homes and the Centre was temporarily closed. Before U Thein told this story I had not realized just how far the experienced yogis provide the right atmosphere for those who are only learning, and how much the morale of the Centre depends on them. Nor had I realized how meditation can breed fearlessness. Unlike Sarana, U Thein had no fear for me alone among the rice fields, but that, Sarana said, was because I was well advanced in years. What, I asked, would he say if a young girl had wanted to live in the Hermitage? To begin with he shook his head, but when I pressed the point that her fearlessness and purity would be her own protection, he agreed that if a young girl really had no fear she would be safe. It was then that he recalled how Daw Nyunt had slept in a different lonely hut every night.

Each time I was at Maha Bodhi there were a few monks. They must have been unusually humble to have sat at the feet of laymen. For monks are a class apart and, as has been said, far superior to any other class. Even novice monks, let alone laymen, may not sit at the same table with them. Separate latrines are provided for them. If a layman wants to speak with them, a special appointment must be made, and if a woman, a suitable male chaperon must be provided. At my request, U Thein arranged an interview with one of them. He selected a young man who had been learning meditation for six months and had been chosen to go to the Shan States' daughter Centre in place of the monk who had died. His departure had been delayed because Chinese War Lords had been causing trouble since the Burmese Government had interfered with their lucrative opium

trade. The young monk did not speak the Shan language, and it was therefore thought unwise for him to go yet awhile. Why could not that charming woman meditator from the Shan States who had been at Maha Bodhi on the occasion of my last visit have acted as instructor? I asked. Why was it necessary to import a monk who could not speak the language? U Thein said that the people there had asked for a phongyi. People always wanted phongyis. There were not more than three or four lay instructors in the whole of Burma, and as for women instructors, that would be beyond anyone's comprehension, not of course that there was any reason why they should not be.

The slim young monk destined for the Shan States was ushered on to Daw Nyunt's verandah, and the merchant-meditator was summoned as chaperon. U Thein paid respect to him and we did the same. Unlike the Mohnyin monks, he was humble and unassuming, and not so young after all, for he was forty-one. His parents were farmers and he had seven brothers and two sisters. He donned the yellow robes with his little boy companions when he was thirteen, for the customary short period in the village phongyi-khaung, and he liked the life so much he never took them off. He was obviously a born religieux and completely content with the way of life he had chosen. He had no knowledge outside the Buddhist Scriptures except such tiny scraps as he might have picked up from seeing an occasional newspaper or a world-map on the wall. He had never heard of Asoka, the great Buddhist Emperor. But the 'Abhidhamma' he knew perfectly; he had passed his lectureship examination at thirty-five and since then had been teaching others. It was because of the theory he had learned in the Abhidhamma that he decided to go further and learn things from his own experience also. The Ledi Sayadaw technique appealed to him and that was why he had come to Maha Bodhi. He did not mind learning from a layman. Did not the Buddha say that if one could learn from a child, one should do so? And what about a woman? Yes, he would be willing to learn from a woman too.

He said he was quite indifferent as to whether or not people paid respect to him. It was not to him they bowed, but to the yellow robe and the merit was to the one who paid respect, not to

the monk who received it. This statement is not wholly correct. People do not go down on their faces to every monk they happen to see—they would spend their time crawling on their hands and knees if they did! But they do go out of their way to bow in the dust if a monk of high rank passes by. So it is to the man, not to the yellow robe, that they pay respect. Further, within Sangha there is a hierarchy of paying respect according to the length of time a man has been a monk, not according to age. When a monk enters a monastery he carefully enquires as to the length of time each of the incumbents has been 'in religion', and pays respect to those who have been monks longer than himself. This Vinaya rule is the opposite of the moral of the story the Buddha told of the elephant, the monkey and the quail to illustrate that age alone is the criterion as to who should receive the greatest respect. And this story was told to monks, not to laymen, and was therefore intended as a guidance to conduct within the Order. (*Book of Discipline*, Vol. 5, p. 224.)

And what was the purpose of the monk's life? I asked. First it was to gain Nirvana for himself, second to study the Scriptures and thirdly to pass on these attainments to others.

If all the monks were like this one, I felt they would indeed be the soul of the people and to a certain extent the instrument of vicarious redemption. It was precisely because few were like him that the lay meditation movement arose. The Sangha, U Thein said, is now waking up to the fact that lay people as well as monks can meditate and find deliverance from suffering, and this has made monks begin to respect lay people more than they did. And then, lest he be verging on saying something uncharitable, he added, 'But the Sangha has done good work in keeping the Scriptures alive, the words of the Buddha himself. If it had not been for the Sangha, they might have died.' I more and more admired the way U Thein avoided answering any question that would have caused him to say something uncharitable. 'They do their work; we do ours.' The meditation movement is a reform movement within Buddhism, but the reformers seek to reform only themselves. And how much hatred, and suffering, would we in Europe have avoided had our reformers done the same!

And because of this live and let live attitude, it was possible to step straight from the pure naked experience of reality at a meditation centre to the Arakan Pagoda, and be told that it housed the actual image which the Buddha is said to have permitted to be made of himself when he left Burma to return to India. (Western scholars may deny there is evidence he ever went to Burma.) This image was later carried off—or stolen, to be more exact, for no one suggests its worshippers liked it being carried off—by a Burmese King to adorn his capital at Mandalay. It has a face of brass polished every day by monks, and the gold leaf has been so lavishly plastered upon its body that the whole figure except the face is soft and spongy. During the Japanese occupation the Pagoda had been closed and monks guarded it. It may seem incredible, but it is a fact that in normal times that wealth of spongy gold leaf is so sacrosanct that not the most hardened robber would dare to scrape off the tiniest atom.

When we entered the shrine where the image sat, worshippers were busy placing flowers before it, offering more gold leaf and burning candles. Sarana bade me remove my hat—you need not take off your hat when you enter a pagoda, but you must do so when you bow in worship. Daw Nyunt then put candles, a whole packet of them, on a stand especially erected for the purpose, and lit them all at once. The burning of candles is symbolic of the arising of the Inner Light. To the Western mind it appeared merely a shocking waste of candles that poor nuns need so badly, and a poor nun was hanging about at the Arakan Pagoda and begging just as importunately as beggars at sacred places in India. Sarana did not understand just how sinister she and her like will be to any who try to raise the status of nuns in Burma.

The next meditator to be interviewed was the Preacher of the Dhamma who had once been a monk. I had never felt attracted to him, and now, as soon as Sarana started to interpret, he nearly converted me into a Christian missionary! His was the same story of farming parentage, of eight children of whom only two were now alive, and of going into the village monastery at

thirteen years of age, and liking it so well that he stayed on. When he was thirty he became ill; he could no longer fulfil the duties of a monk, so he took off the yellow robes and returned home. After seven years his health recovered, but he did not put on the robes again. Surely now he would tell how empty and futile were the vast majority of the Vinaya Rules and that his illness had shown him a better way. Nothing of the sort. He was a stickler for the Rules. He said that if the Buddha were alive now, he would make a great many more; the trouble with the present-day Sangha was that the Rules were not kept nearly strictly enough; monks actually cut dead wood back from trees instead of confining themselves to sweeping up rubbish, and leaving other work to boy novices; worse still, they went into villages with one shoulder bare, and they put on sandals and carried umbrellas; in the olden days they went into villages only for alms and in case of emergency; now they travelled here, there and everywhere; of course they had to go into towns to study the Scriptures, and the Buddha would have permitted them to go in trains and cars, but they ought not to travel in horse-drawn vehicles. I suggested that letting boy novices handle money to buy what monks wanted was hardly in accord with truth, and that was the one point on which he and I appeared to agree. I asked if he thought women ought to be allowed to become members of the Sangha as in the Buddha's day. That, he said, was quite out of the question, for a woman must be ordained by a nun as well as a monk, and there were now no proper nuns. I suggested they might import a proper nun from one of the Northern Buddhist countries. That would not help, he said, for the monks would not recognize her. But of course, nuns could do the work of learning and meditation even though not members of the Sangha. I ended by asking just what the monks did with their time. They were supposed either to study or meditate, but he had a very poor idea of their attainments in either field. After ordination they are supposed to learn at least enough Pali to memorize the Vinaya Rules if nothing else, but sometimes he was inclined to think they hardly did this much. The Preacher of the Dhamma was not a happy man. He was poor for he had no family to support him. Yet he had taken the Ten Precepts of monks, and one might be

certain that he would scorn to use the hands of someone else to purchase the things monks usually buy, such as cigarettes. Everyone has some point one can admire, and I very genuinely admired the fact that he, a man of sixty-seven, spent several hours each day in helping to keep the garden tidy.

There was a dear old couple who occupied a cottage near the Dhamma Hall and who used to entertain U Thein to a cup of tea after lunch. The old man was busy taking the ribs out of toddy palm leaves to make a broom when I went to talk with his wife. They had been at Maha Bodhi since its foundation, and they helped U Thein with the Vipassana initiation. I had noticed the old man at the last one dressed in a spotlessly clean longyi and sitting like everyone else (except the monks and me!) on a hard bamboo mat. They had no children. They had earned their living by growing fruit and roses. When she was thirty-one she stayed at a meditation centre in the Sagaing Hills where there were huts and caves to meditate in by day and rest houses in which to sleep at night. The monk in charge taught the most difficult of the anapana methods, that of counting the breaths coming in and out. For the first five days he would preach about this method; on the sixth he would say ‘This is Vipassana day; we shall commence practising Vipassana,’ and a sermon on Vipassana would follow. She started going to Sagaing fairly frequently and once she stayed five months. This must have been one of the few meditation centres for lay people in those early days. Incidentally it was here Sarana first met Einda. When the Maha Bodhi Centre opened they decided to give up their work and live the rest of their lives on their small savings and the little extra they earned through selling food for fishes to the sightseers who came to feed them in the ornamental lake. She was now seventy-eight and her husband seventy-four, and they had been here over eleven years and found perfect peace and joy. In answer to my question as to whether there was anything in the world whose coming into existence or whose ceasing to be, would cause her pain, she replied that she had cried just a little when U Thein’s young daughter of nineteen had died, for the child was very lovely and used to sleep in their cottage. Her father had taught her to

meditate, and surely all was well, but she could not help missing her just a little.

The heavy dews were not falling now and, though the sky was clear and starlit, the ground in the morning was dry and the banana leaves no longer served as face-washers. Forest fires lit up the Maymyu hills, forests of valuable teak, Sarana said. The garden got more and more parched despite the three-hourly watering nearly every other day, and the mud caked hard as stone. It made me appreciate the sandy soil of my own vegetable garden. I should think that this soil would require not a mattock, but a pickaxe, to dig it. Still the old man persisted in his efforts and in due course small cauliflowers, onions and Chinese cabbages reached maturity. Whether the cauliflowers were small because of their breed or because of the absence of proper cultivation, I could not determine. The old man's face was usually impassive, but if I caught his eye and smiled, his face would light up with joy and he would smile, too. I had started using a charcoal stove to boil the water for the thermos, to save the cook the labour of carrying it over from the kitchen, and I had painfully been gathering some shavings as kindling, when I saw the old man approaching with a large basket of kindling which he emptied out beside my small pile with obvious delight. It was no wonder the first English words people learned at the Centre were 'Thank you very much'. There were so many occasions for saying them.

The old man's parents had been farmers, but as they were poor he himself had earned wages by working for others, looking after their cows and tilling their soil, and became what is called a village coolie. He had married and had three children, but his wife was now dead. About a year before he had heard the village phongyi preaching a sermon about meditation and he had started to learn. The method he taught was that of mindfulness on actions, being ceaselessly mindful of what you are doing, saying and thinking. He was getting on very well with this method, but also he was getting on in years, and a village coolie's work is very hard. His children said to him, 'You are interested in

meditation. Why not end your days at Maha Bodhi?' This was six months ago. At first he found the Maha Bodhi method of meditation a little difficult, but when he got the idea of phyit-pyet flowing through the heart, all went well, he found the same thing as by the other method; after the Vipassana initiation he had no more difficulty, and meditated happily according to the timetable. But then the paid gardener left and he took over much of his work, so that now he could meditate only from 4 a.m. to 6 a.m. and from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. and at odd times in between. 'Is there anything at all you now desire?' I asked. 'Nothing at all. The Instructor provides me with food and clothing. What more could a man want?' I produced the camera. He hastily went into his little hut, one that was built over the moat, and emerged clad in clean longyi and shirt and stood proudly on the wooden causeway.

'You see,' I said to U Thein, 'that old man proves that the simple minded find the secret of meditation far more easily than clever intellectuals.' He smiled, 'The peasant from the jungle village usually finds the Dhamma easily. The learned monk sometimes never finds it.' And a wiser than he declared, 'Except ye become as little children, ye shall in nowise enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'

It was with a pang of envy that I settled down to meditate again, telling Mara, the personification of ego, that he was very clever, but that I was not going to play with him anymore. I had discovered that cleverness is the worst enemy of meditation. Taking photographs was not a distraction, but making clever facetious remarks while doing so most definitely was—I once made even the solemn monks laugh as they looked on while the wealthy merchant lady smoking her huge cigar was posing for the camera under the shadow of her new Dhamma Hall. The faculty of being able to make people laugh has often broken the tension with clients and dissolved an unpleasant situation into smiles, but one pays for every talent, and I realized that success in meditation meant restraining the natural inclination to humorous comment, for it tended to lack of mindfulness, the very basis of concentration. The Buddha condemned uncontrolled laughter and I now understood why. It is not the

laughter that matters, but the lack of awareness and control that generally lie behind it. And, having grasped this truth, the Dhamma brought a long period of blissful absorption in the phyit-pyet softly flowing through the mind and body, when all sense of 'I' faded away. It was followed, of course, by one of wandering thoughts and self-pity at failure, Mara feeling sorry for himself that he had been dismissed! It is interesting that both the Instructor and Daw Nyunt stressed the need for loving-kindness towards Mara, the ego with all its failures and weaknesses. Jung also had found that the most deadly enemy we must learn to love and forgive is the dark side of our own selves. To chafe against ourselves for our failures is just as bad as cursing other people for theirs.

It was at this time that Sarana brought some nuns to see the hermitage, during the 5 p.m. recreational period. Among them was a middle-aged woman from Maymyu only recently ordained. Something drew me irresistibly towards her as one far older and more experienced though in age six years junior. She and her husband, who was seventy, had conducted a business of manufacturing bamboo roofing material. It was six years since she had started meditating. During the first three years faith alone had sustained her. Then suddenly meditation became easier and very soon tremendously satisfying. She handed the housekeeping over to her daughter—she had six children, three boys and three girls—and relinquished as far as possible her work in the business. She would have liked to become a nun even then, but her work in the business was still indispensable. So she bided her time and taught her husband and sons the wisdom she had learned. 'I found the Dhamma first,' she explained with childlike simplicity. A year before, her husband had agreed to her going forth from home, but before she could put the robes on she became ill; so it was only a few weeks since she was ordained. And why did she become a nun? Why could she not meditate as a laywoman? Her answer is very interesting. She would have greater freedom as a nun, freedom to go where the Dhamma led without any feeling of obligation to her family. But also she felt 'the Dhamma wanted her to don the robes of a nun'. The Westerner reading learned treatises on Buddhism gets

no inkling of the reality of the meaning of the guidance of the Dhamma to the Buddhist-born. True, there is no sense of a personal God, but the guidance of the Inner Light is every whit as real to the Buddhist meditator as to the Quaker, perhaps more so, because in the East religion is not divorced from mundane life as it is in the West.

Khema, as was her name 'in religion' (the name of King Bimbisara's wife) had come to Maha Bodhi during the very cold weather of Maymyu, but as soon as the weather warmed she would return to her home town to become the first permanent meditator at a small new meditation centre there, at present only visited by a monk during the rainy season of Lent. She expected that others would follow her lead but, even if they did not, she had no objection to living alone and there were nunneries close by. She had taught others outside her family and she thought women might come to her at the centre for instruction. And what about men? She said she hardly expected men to come, for Burmese men are very prejudiced against women in such matters, but the monk in charge would not mind if she taught men also. She was a vegetarian herself, and needed only a little dish of beans. If other people came, probably the monk's sister would cook for them. The method taught at that centre was similar to that at Maha Bodhi; they started with anapana and then changed to Vipassana by contemplating the phyit-pyet within the head. She was quiet and gentle and yet with a subtle strength that only the quiet and gentle can possess.

From the Hermitage one could imagine rather than see the Leper Meditation Centre which had so impressed me on the last visit. But U Thein went there no longer. The monk from the centre from which U Thein had departed when he was no longer wanted had taken charge of the Leper Centre. What lay behind this? Needless to say U Thein gave not the slightest hint of anything sinister. Then Sarana visited it and reported that all the nuns and lay women had left. Why? I went over to see for myself why such a bright star in local Buddhism had become so pale. Sarana took us past the Wesleyan Leper Settlement on the banks

of a water-lily spangled lake. At the Leper Centre we first came upon a small group of women telling their rosaries. One of them was from the Wesleyan Settlement, having been granted leave of absence to go to what the Wesleyans would have called her own place of worship, on the Sabbath. The only other people at the Centre were novice monks—no one with a disease like leprosy may be fully ordained. All except about three huts stood forlorn and empty. Why had the laymen, laywomen and nuns all left? The novice monks told us they had gone because they could not get food. There were no lay benefactors to support them or make arrangements for food to be supplied by the government, and being diseased they could not go to government offices themselves, and now there were not enough there to qualify for government support. And so it was a vicious circle—no people, no food—no food, no people. They themselves, because of their yellow robes, could go into the village to beg for alms. But there is little merit in giving to healthy nuns, let alone diseased ones, so the nuns could get no food and had had to go either to the government leper centre or to the Catholic or Wesleyan ones. And why, the Christian asks, could not their monk-pastor have helped them? Well, monks do not do that sort of thing, and that is all there is to say.

And so the pretty little huts, the banana trees, the orange African marigolds and the few orange robes were all that were reflected in the quiet waters of the lake. In the days of the Buddhist Emperor Asoka of India and of the Prince Regent, Shotoku of Japan, this would not have been so, and one can hear the Buddha saying, 'He who would wait upon me, let him wait upon the sick.' Good works may not be an end in themselves, but if we reap in other lives what we have sown in this, what fate will await those who lack compassion for the suffering, even though those that suffer may do so because of ill deeds done in previous lives? I was little minded to give to those who wore yellow robes, because they were so well looked after by others. But when I thought of the horrible disease of these novice monks, I relented, and the cook and another man went off with a load of useful things such as soap and candles. The Buddha said

it is more blessed to give with one's own hand, but time was running very short.

On one of the visits to the bank a young Burmese doctor came into the Manager's room at the same time—in Mandalay, instead of waiting in a queue outside the Manager's door, you walk boldly in, take a seat at his table, and profitably occupy the time while you are waiting your turn by listening to the private financial affairs of everyone else! This young doctor was very scornful of my having come to Mandalay to practise meditation, which was purely selfish, whereas his work was the relief of the suffering of others. U Thein's comment on this remark was, 'The doctor's work is the gift of copper; meditation is the gift of gold. The doctor's art can only alleviate suffering, but the art of meditation shows the way to deliverance from suffering altogether. The gift of the Dhamma is the greatest of all gifts.' But the gift of a little rice, I thought to myself, might have enabled the lepers to have received the gift of the Dhamma also. Good works are certainly not, as many Christians think, an end in themselves in a world where all is transient, and there is no point in prolonging a man's life in this world of suffering unless one can show him the way to deliverance from suffering. But the Buddha himself refused to preach about the Dhamma and the way of deliverance until a hungry man had first been fed. (*Harvard Oriental Series*, Vol. 30, p. 74.)

Daw Nyunt's very heavy work at Maha Bodhi had to some extent been lessened since I was last there, by the advent of a retired wealthy merchant, sixty-three years old, who had formerly imported tea, sesame, cheroot-leaves, peas and coffee from the Shan States to Mandalay. His work was now to look after the yogis' needs when Daw Nyunt was not there, give receipts for money and attend to new building works. But this left ample time for meditation, and he had been practising meditation for eight years. Like Khema, he had found it difficult to begin with, but at the end of four years, like her, he had wanted to retire from business, but his wife and three children would not give their consent. He threatened to shave off his hair

and become a monk. At length, in April the year previously, they had given in. He was allowed to hand over his wealth and his business to them, and retire to Maha Bodhi. His wife was a meditator also, and came to the Centre on the Sabbaths, but she did not feel that she herself could as yet leave her two sons who were still unmarried. When she came to the Centre she would take her husband's laundry home and bring it back the next Sabbath. For the rest, the family provided for his very simple wants. Whenever he paid a visit home, there were always troubles and discords and he was very glad to get back; he had reached an age when all he wanted was to end his days in peace and be the means of helping others to do the same.

Sarana commented, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but this rich man has done so.' True, but soon after he had entered, he found it imperative to give up his wealth. It is the attachment to worldly goods that matters, not their possession, but I never met a resident yogi who still retained his wealth.

The ex-merchant sat at a table by himself in the dining room. The reason he did not sit at the same small round table as the old man who watered the garden, was not because the former had been wealthy, and latter poor—all were equal at Maha Bodhi—but because he was a vegetarian. When he came to Maha Bodhi, he took a vow saying, 'I will now become a vegetarian. May my meditation be good.' His wish had been fulfilled. And why then, did he not eat at the same table as I? Well, simply because men and women never do eat at the same table.

The nun, Khema, and the ex-merchant had come from the upper levels of the merchant class, but probably a majority of nun and laywomen meditators were from the shopkeeping class. The two other women with whom I talked were bazaar-merchants, that is, petty shop-proprietors.

The first was the nun who cooked one dish for me. She was only fifty-two, and the only one who fitted in with Fielding Hall's idea that only women who had suffered some

bereavement, or been crossed in love, became nuns, which is very wide of the mark. This woman had lost her husband twenty-five years before, and seven years later she lost the last of her three children. But she had not become a nun at once. She had continued running her fruit shop for two years before she was introduced to meditation. Even then she was content to practise at home. When Maha Bodhi was opened it was not at first possible to live there and cook for oneself and she could not afford to pay for her meals. She went to Sagaing Hills, took off her jewellery and put on the nun's robes. That was seven years ago. Since then she had meditated continuously, first at Sagaing Hills and later at Maha Bodhi. U Thein did not want nuns to do any work except help with the Vipassana initiation. But, of course, if anyone was in need of help, she was always ready, and she had in fact nursed one old lady through her last illness. Now, when she returned to the market, she saw greed and avarice everywhere, and it was mental agony for her. She had not noticed these things when she worked there herself. When she had worked in the shop she had done nothing to help other people, but now, even apart from meditation, there were often things she could do for others, for example, cooking one dish a day for the foreign yogi. All she asked for herself was to spend her days in peace.

The other woman, whom I called the Red Dragon lady, was not a nun, and felt no call to become one. It was she that had helped the cook-lady carry my lunch over to the hermitage. She had become interested in meditation twenty years ago, soon after her husband's death and when she was only thirty-five and her three boys still young, and her shopkeeper's business necessary for their support. She took a fifteen days' meditation course with the Anapana technique at Shwebo Monastery and practiced this method at home for nineteen years until her sons were grown up and married. Then she went to the Red Dragon Meditation Centre near Mandalay Hill, where the method taught was the contemplation of the thirty-two different parts of the body, and there was no deliberate switching over to the Vipassana objective. I was always hearing about the Centre which had been founded and endowed by the wealthy woman merchant who

made her wealth out of the manufacture of cheroots bearing the trade-mark of a red dragon. Meals were provided free at this Centre, and naturally it was always crowded.

The 'Red Dragon lady' had stayed at the Red Dragon Centre for many months, but she left it for the peace of Maha Bodhi and a technique she found better and also easier. Her sons would gladly have set her up in business again, but she had no mind for this. All she wanted was to end her days in peace, but she too was always ready to give any help needed, as for example, assisting the cook-lady to carry meals for the foreign yogi! The cottage she occupied had been built by a relative; if the relative came to live there during the rainy season, she would probably be able to live with her. Her face was still young and bore the mark of serene tranquillity.

The talks with the yogis revealed a homogeneity of community life which might well be envied by our own youthful enthusiasts who try to start 'communities' without the spiritual and religious foundation which alone appears to prevent such groups from foundering very soon. This group was not self-supporting; it grew almost no fruit or vegetables, kept no cows or livestock. It was almost entirely dependent on donations from supporters, for the charge made to yogis-in-training did not even cover the cost of food and cooks' wages. There was no rule that permanent yogis must own nothing, but in fact, even though not monks or nuns, they handed over all their worldly possessions to their families. Often the permanent yogis had relatives to support them, but not always.

Unlike most communities, Maha Bodhi appeared to have no conscious government. Theoretically, U Thein was temporal, as well as spiritual, ruler. But no one was conscious of any rule and in fact Daw Nyunt was the temporal head and ordered most things. In the end public opinion or the supporters of the Centre decided matters, as for example when they invited a famous Dhamma preacher to officiate at the opening of the new Dhamma Hall. Both U Thein and Daw Nyunt knew this would not help meditation, but they did nothing to oppose the invitation. All, except the cook couple, gave their services

voluntarily. The tasks of Daw Nyunt and of the old man who did the gardening were obviously heavy, but no less vital to the life of the community was the work of those who merely provided the right atmosphere and assisted at the Vipassana initiation ceremony.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DISTRACTIONS

It was somewhat reluctantly that U Thein agreed the Dhamma required me to go to Maymyu, but in the end he was content to leave my folly, if such it was, to the Dhamma to rectify. The Maymyu Hills had risen tantalizingly to the north-east ever since I had first sat down in the little hut above the moat, and Sarana had told me about their beauties, especially the beauty of the cherry blossom. And there were meditation centres there, also. So on the Sunday before leaving Mandalay, U Aye Bo arranged for his friend, U Thant, to drive us up. A charming actress dressed in red with flashing jewels came with us to visit her people.

The road wound up in corkscrew fashion with splendid views of a fine range of pointed mountain peaks—of no interest whatsoever to the Burmese because they had no pagodas on them! But we passed a hill by the roadside whose pagodas sparkled in the early morning sun. Now that was something worthwhile, and we stopped for photos. A little later we passed a particularly good lookout and that had also been made worthwhile by the erection of a pagoda through whose arches could be seen both the pointed peaks and also the glistening waters of the Irrawaddy. When there is a pagoda even the gay holidaymaker will stop for a few moments of mindfulness and repetition of the Refuges; that is why pagodas in holiday resorts are essential.

Streams overhung with glossy green trees ran at the bottom of the valleys, among them banyan trees, but not the sacred *ficus religiosa* under whose shade the Buddha sat when he found

enlightenment and whose leaves are larger than the Burmese variety. Above the valley depths, the hillsides were covered mainly with semi-deciduous trees, including teak and a dried-up brown bamboo undergrowth which would burst into green with the coming of the April rains. These forested hills were utterly unlike the dense jungle through which we had passed in 1938 during the rainy season when we tramped from Myitkyina to Kambaiti Pass. The verdure on these hills appeared something like the prickly growth on the hills near Rajagaha or Rajgir in India, a little of which went a long way when the track ended. But here there would be tracks to all the Shan villages and the aridity ended in the lush green along the beds of the streams. Villages abounded but the cottages were well hidden and only an occasional unterraced pineapple field or other cultivation revealed the moth-eaten patches seen from the plane.

There had been a bad accident on the road below the pagoda. The brakes of the jeep had failed; it lay tilted on its side on the corkscrew below and its occupants had been taken to hospital. Coffee plantations were carefully covered with bamboo matting showing that Sarana was right, there are frosts in winter even though the Maymyu Hills are only 3,000 feet high. There were signs of several industries such as a condensed milk factory, while ring-barked teak trees were standing ready for felling after they had dried out for three years. There were wayside tea-shops and stalls, not unlike those in Australia except that the vendors sat cross-legged on platforms. There was also a polling booth ready for the elections with the inevitable pagoda beside it, and a cow-shed behind. But the most interesting sight was a Nat village, lots and lots of little dolls' houses on stilts, some of them with images of the actual Nat, and many with vases of freshly-placed flowers.

As has been said, I never heard of anyone who had seen a Nat, but everyone is absolutely certain they exist. Even U Thein, who had no interest in astrologers, sent them loving-kindness and when he rang the gong-bell he sometimes felt there were celestial beings or Nats looking on approvingly. He said that if a meditator knew there were evil Nats about in a certain place, he should not meditate there, not that the Nats could do him any

harm, but his presence might disturb and antagonize an evil Nat. (This is sound advice when applied to hostile human beings also.) Sometimes, too, in an extremity he had said to the Nats, 'I have always sent you loving-kindness. Now it is your turn, will you help me?'—and he a Buddhist who does not believe that gods have power to help since they themselves are held within the Dhamma like all other beings! U Thant, a trained scientist, tried to decry the Nats, but when I told him the story of two motor-car accidents in an identical spot near Sydney Botanical Gardens, and none afterwards, he readily agreed that Nats could be the only explanation. And U Aye Bo lights candles in the morning, some for the Nats for his sufferings and some for the Buddha for his enlightenment. And Sarana burns candles for the Nats near her meditation hut.

Maymyu was announced by a road sign. Would it be as beautiful as Indian hill-stations in the Himalayas, hill-towns like Almora on a mile-long ridge to which the houses cling like limpets so that you can step from the track behind on to the roof of the house below, and where you look through tall dark deodars to white snow-peaks? But Maymyu is built upon a flat plateau, so flat that bicycles are in evidence everywhere, and of course there are no snow-peaks. There are not even trees lining the streets to screen the shops from the dusty roads. Only when we reached the former British quarter was Maymyu beautiful with shady trees and widespread gardens which must have been lovelier still when tended by hosts of 'native' gardeners. But how I should have hated it then! The British made this Myu or town. One can picture Governor May sweltering in the tropic heat of summer in Mandalay, riding up to the cool hills and finding only Shan villagers enjoying their salubrious climate, and then promptly starting to build his town on the tops and taking with him Burmese as well as Indians, whose descendants now make it a cosmopolitan society, where the different races and religions mix at work and on festive occasions but still do not intermarry. We passed two funerals, one of a Hindu with the corpse partly exposed; the other of a Moslem with the corpse fully covered. There are Hindu temples and Moslem mosques, and Buddhists attend the phongyi-khaungs on Sabbaths and

listen to sermons by phongyis. And U Nu, unwilling that people should take pleasure without acquiring merit, has built a pagoda in the British Park near a charming artificial lake, and we saw the gaily-dressed holidaymakers snatching a few stolen flowers to lay before the Buddha image while they repeated the Refuges. Nearby it he had also provided a shrine for the ubiquitous Nats. Cherry blossom was in full bloom, a misty pink wherever you looked. The cherries may not be exported lest the trees be injured, but they are wild cherries and only children are interested in eating them. But Maymyu grows other English fruit, and we had strawberries for lunch.

Lunch was at the house of Sarana's sister, Daw Saw Yin, who taught at the Catholic school where Sarana also had taught. She was the breadwinner for Sarana's aged mother, her sister who had become blind, the younger sister's husband who was old and had retired, their child and an aunt. And now that Sarana was a nun she provided, too, the wherewithal for her food. The family had a child boarder to assist finances a little. It was Daw Saw Yin's ambition after her mother died to let the house and retire from the world as a lay meditator. The Westerner will regard it as most unfair that one woman should be the breadwinner for all those people and will say that Sarana should take off the robes and work also. But Daw Saw Yin saw nothing strange or unfair; in past times Sarana had given up her career to earn money to bring up her younger brothers and sisters, and now, like Mary, she had chosen the better part and it would not be taken from her. Moreover, she had already been able to give 'the gift of the Dhamma' to her mother, who from being opposed to her daughter becoming a nun, had now taken to meditation herself, and found inner peace.

There were three meditation centres in Maymyu. The first we visited was the small one where the new nun, Khema, would take up residence as soon as the warm weather commenced, but which was now empty since the phongyi came only during Lent. I spent an hour resting and meditating in one of its huts, which on account of the cold, were far more solidly built than those in Mandalay. The second was a branch of the Red Dragon Centre near Mandalay Hill. There were monks here, nuns and boy-

novices. The last practised meditation only from 4 a.m. to 6 a.m. The rest of the day they chanted their lessons. It would certainly be a good centre at which to meditate upon 'Only the ear and the object of hearing and consciousness connecting them. The other thirty-one parts of the body would probably be easily dismissed from consciousness in the urgent necessity for eliminating the connection between the hearing and the object of hearing! One of the nuns picked some English flowers for me. But as well as English flowers there was a good old Australian eucalypt, and a red bottle-brush that might have come from my own little bushland garden of 'Ahimsa'. The last centre was large and the grass much grown; it practised the breathing or anapana method, but there did not seem to be anyone there at this time.

A far worse distraction than going to Maymyu was the prospect of having to give a lecture the evening after. I am used to giving lectures but I nonetheless became extremely nervous with the result that a sore throat developed. Of course nervousness is due to egoism, failure to trust the Dhamma and not knowing the meaning of Anatta in actual experience. The trouble was that the audience was an unknown quantity, and their reactions something I could not gauge, for when I turned over in the mind what to say to them I realized for the first time the tremendous difference between their thought wavelength and my own. The ordeal was worse by reason of everything having to pass through an interpreter. The only saving feature was a few colour lantern slides, but even these would be incomprehensible to people who regarded a landscape of no value unless it had pagodas, while to my Sydney friends and me it is of no value unless it is totally devoid of any evidence of the existence of human beings.

When the time came, it was a great relief to hear Sarana's translation raising an occasional laugh.

After it was over Sarana, an excellent organizer, had arranged that my donations or Danas should be made. To one brought up on 'Let not your left hand know what your right hand doeth', it was most embarrassing to listen to a recital one after another of the various donations made or about to be made by 'Daw Marie',

including the trifling two pounds' worth of goods given to the Lepers, a copy of *Footprints of Gawtama the Buddha* to U Aye Bo, the Burmese translation of the *Digha Nikaya* and the English translation of the *Majjhima Nikaya* to Sarana, as well as more substantial gifts of money for Einda's cottage, U Aye Bo's Meditation Centre under Mandalay Hill, Sarana's meditation huts-to-be, and of course for Maha Bodhi. I mention these things not to show the bank did produce the money a few days before I left, nor because I no longer have a guilty feeling at having my benefactions made public, but to show the difference between the Burmese outlook and our own. When the recital of Daw Marie's Danas came to an end, the one monk who was present (the one I had interviewed) recited blessings, while I poured water from a small jar into a large one saying 'phyit-pyet! phyit-pyet!' as I did so—all is transient, the giver, the gift and the receiver of the gift. After that, one of the men rang the large gong-bell to distribute the merit. But all the same the alms were not 'done in secret', even though the merit might have been distributed!

Something went wrong with the electric light part way through the pictures and there was a request for a re-showing the next evening. The other three monks attended this time. Do I flatter myself that the modest young monk had told Thein there was nothing improper in this show, and that perhaps they might even learn something from a woman? Things went off better this time. I had found the technique for talking through an interpreter, and Sarana was less nervous because there were no English-speaking people in the audience to criticize her translation. There was a gratifying snigger of amusement at the picture of one of the ashrams of Anandamaya, the woman saint of India, and the comment that in India people did not worship everyone who wore the yellow robes but only those they believed to be arahats, and that in religion there was no sex-distinction. Again, do I flatter myself that perhaps I sowed in Mandalay a tiny seed of respect for the female caste?

When I complained to U Thein that this lecturing was a far worse distraction than going to Maymyu, he was not the least understanding. These lectures had been a very good thing for

people to hear, for I had come all the way from Australia to Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre, whereas many of the audience would not even come from the bazaar! In other words, martyred to make Mandalay meditators!

But the distraction of anxiety about the lecture was not the reason that meditation on this second visit had been less successful than on the first. It is true that progress had been made and that there had been blissful experiences of mind and body consisting of changing atoms, and that these had been more complete than previously. But long periods of samadhi had come less often and progress had been less spectacular. This was probably due to a too intense striving and determination, and failure to let the natural law of being develop matters without interference from consciousness. But meditation is only one of the eight steps of the Eightfold Path. It is not an end in itself. The ultimate objective is the deliverance from suffering through the dissipation of the asavas, the biases or tendencies with which we are born to seek sensual pleasures, to perpetuate our egos, to remain ignorant of the true nature of things. When the real objective of meditation is borne in mind, the second visit to Burmese meditation centres must be adjudged far more fruitful than the first and the results far more in evidence on the return home. Indeed the results experienced when back in Australia left no doubt whatever that learning to gather in diffuseness of thought, coupled with conscious training in loving-kindness and truthfulness must inevitably lead to deliverance from suffering and the peace that passes understanding.

The night before leaving there was happy wakefulness and easy concentration. All doubts seemed to clear and the way to open up. I visited U Thein early next morning for a final talk before the yogis arrived, for it was the Sabbath. He said that if I lived in Burma it would be well to spend a month every year at Maha Bodhi, and I heartily concurred. I asked him how one could distinguish between the pains that come as the result of the working of the Dhamma (such as the abdominal pains on the

first visit to Maha Bodhi or when sitting in the Dhamma Hall on this visit) and those pains which come from Mara, or egoism (such as the red hot needles). His reply was that pain that is the result of the working of the Dhamma, the law of one's being, comes on slowly and gradually and departs slowly and gradually, whereas that which comes from Mara comes quickly and departs quickly, for it is the attempt of the ego to distract one from the Dhamma, and from meditation. The remedy for the latter is to feel no ill will, to recognize it as springing from the innate tendency to create an individual self, and increase the intensity of meditation. In both cases the pain must be borne tranquilly and no attempt made to terminate it. Only when pains are due to cosmic karma, such as sudden change of temperature, is it necessary or wise to look for a remedy external to oneself.

I also asked about the remedy for sleepiness and he said it was best to increase the intensity of meditation unless the sleepiness was due to weariness, when the body's needs must be allowed to have their way. But weariness itself, he said, is usually due to lack of mindfulness. If it is at all possible to meditate, one should do so and the weariness will gradually disappear, and this I later proved correct. After the return home there were many occasions for examining U Thein's other assertion that weariness is due to lack of mindfulness. Often this did seem to be the case, but more often weariness seemed to spring from thoughts of resentment against seeming overwork, or perhaps a clerk's default, or my own. When it was possible to pass the day without the smallest thought of resentment creeping in, then no matter how filled was the day, there was no overwork, and therefore no weariness. Moreover, it was quite possible to be mindful of thoughts of resentment and yet be unable to get rid of them, and in that case mindfulness did not prevent weariness. The ultimate remedy lies in ceaseless training, so that in the end thoughts and feelings of antagonism and ill will become impossible, as impossible as it would be for a properly trained child to omit to say 'please' and 'thank you'. Once again U Thein was certain that in Australia I should be able to show others how to meditate, and once again he asserted that it was not necessary for Australians to become Buddhists nor

even understand the basic principles of Buddhism. He went on to tell of a Burmese doctor, who was a Christian, who came to Maha Bodhi because the method practised here appealed to him. He asked if he must first become a Buddhist, and U Thein had replied, ‘Certainly not. There is only one Dhamma, one Law which holds all.’

As he was giving his last admonitions, the Sabbath Day yogis began to arrive to pay respect to the Instructor and also to overwhelm me with farewell gifts. They said I might give them away when I returned to Australia so long as I accepted them now. Pretty black and gold lacquer-ware and Shan shoulder bags predominated, and Daw Nyunt presented a lacquer tray with a fine crested lion holding up his foot and presumably suffusing his wicked son with thoughts of loving-kindness.

When we started for the airstrip a veritable procession of cars followed, rather like a funeral procession, I thought. But U Aye Bo was not among the thirty odd yogis who occupied the cars. Urgent business once again called him. The death of his mother had left a peck of troubles behind. Under Buddhist law children inherit equally, but when parents express a clear intention otherwise children usually carry it out. U Aye Bo’s mother had said that her business was to pass to U Aye Bo’s daughter and niece, whom she had been training, but some of the other brothers and sisters were not willing, and poor U Aye Bo had been ‘poked at’ (to use his own expression) from all sides. Only on the day before had he got them to sign a document agreeing to carry out the wishes of the deceased. That was one problem out of the way. There remained the business of his brother, which on account of the export side he did not consider ‘clean’. He wanted to join his daughter and niece in his mother’s tea-leaf business which was clean.

At the airstrip it was found that the numerous presents had overweighted for air-travel the previous thirty pounds of luggage. The official kindly turned his blind eye to the scales. Perhaps he looked at the ‘thirty-two different parts of the body’ which though in perfect running order had been reduced to a bare six stones (84 lb.) and thought they offset the presents!

Among those at the airstrip was U Kywa, the man who had sat down beside me as I was drinking lime juice on the first visit and declared he had known me in a previous life. It was he who was expected to take U Thein's place as Instructor one day. He himself had fixed his departure from the world seven years hence when he would be fifty-two and his youngest child nine. He had married young and had eight children and some of them had been born after he had begun to practise meditation at the age of thirty-five. Although meditators are advised not to run after sensual pleasures and the things of this world, it is recognized that these cannot be given up forcibly (except of course during residence at Maha Bodhi). There was none of Gandhi' insistence that sex must be completely sublimated after the second child is born, and most of the married meditators had medium-large families, and had not stopped adding to them after they started to meditate. U Kywa's conversion dated back to a sermon he heard from a phongyi who said that running after the pleasures of the senses was like a dog biting a bone, not content with one he goes on to another, and then to another. And so with the pleasures of the senses. When one sense craving is gratified, a man goes after another; and not satisfied with the dissatisfactions of one life, he creates for himself another and yet another. As he pondered over the phongyi's words he realized he would never be contented with the things of this world. Hearing of U Thein he went to Maha Bodbi. For three years he found meditation difficult, but it seemed the only way and he kept to it, each week coming to meditate on the Sabbath, asking questions and correcting his mistakes. The things of this world got less and less satisfying and he wanted to get away from his successful business of vendor of cosmetics and beauty-products, but he could not leave his family unprovided for. It is a fact that few of the meditators had previously had work that was either interesting in itself or helpful to others, and it had never entered their heads that by working for 'worthy causes' there is an outlet for creative energy when the daily work is not satisfying. Would the desire to leave the world have been otherwise had this outlet been made use of?

On the other hand one recalls the ashramas of the Hindus, the four stages of life. The first is that of Brahmacharya or student's

life; the second is that of householder, as spouse and parent. Then comes the turning away from the world when husband and wife retire to the forest. The last, that of Sannyasin, must be trodden alone and without worldly possessions. Might this be a natural and proper division of life, the first half devoted mainly to the things of this world, and the second from thirty-five or forty onward to things not of this world? Very few of the younger meditators did more than dabble in meditation. For most the serious practice started in middle life. Then in old age they gave away their work and wealth and went to Maha Bodhi or other retreats, to find peace for themselves and provide the background and atmosphere for those who were still training. Is it possible that for most, even work for worthy causes should be given up in old age, for even worthy causes are among the things of this world that cannot last?

The plane ran along the airstrip and left behind a group of people who had become like brothers and sisters. So far as could be observed they formed a community not perfect, but entirely without discord. When people spend most of their time in silence perhaps it is easy to achieve peace and concord, for of all the 'thirty-two different parts of the body', the tongue must surely be the greatest creator of strife. Whatever the explanation there is no doubt that the result was a haven of peace for the workers in the world, as well as for those who wished to leave the world in their old age. It also provided the training for the living of old age, not as rubbish on the shelf, a burden to themselves and to others, but as the inspiration for those who were younger, and as the storehouse of wisdom acquired during a lifetime.

Meditation centres like Maha Bodhi demand a simplification of life comparable to that of a Catholic monk or nun in an enclosed order, and they are hardly likely to arise in the West, where nearly all are overwhelmed by wealth and distractions. Like the rich young man whom Jesus bade sell all he had and give to the poor, we too must probably turn away sorrowful because we have great possessions. Nonetheless even to know such centres exist may be an inspiration to those few in the West who are genuinely seeking to find the pearl of great price and are prepared to pay the cost demanded for it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

REFLECTIONS OF THE INTELLECT

The intellect, or thinking organ, is the sixth sense. Yielding to the desire of any of the senses retards meditation, for all are sources of distraction. Hence it is that intellectual people who are forever asking questions and trying to find answers, usually make slower progress in Vipassana meditation than simpleminded people who are content to practise with faith and without trying to formulate the how, why and wherefore.

This chapter is a deliberate indulgence of the lust of the sixth sense, the intellect, the posing of certain theoretical questions in relation to Vipassana meditation and an attempt to answer them. In other words it is sinning against the light by making it difficult to understand things that are easy to those of the childlike mind to whom belongs the Kingdom of Heaven.

VIPASSANA MEDITATION AND PSYCHOLOGIST JUNG

Dr Carl Jung is one of the very few outstanding Western psychologists who are satisfied that man can experience what is Beyond the cognition of the five senses and the sixth sense, his thinking organ. Moreover, he has found that of all his patients in the second half of life, that is, over the age of thirty-five, 'there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life'. To return to the old irrational creeds was usually impossible for them, and the terminology he used to explain the peace they found when they followed his methods had therefore to be without the term 'God'. For this

reason many Western Buddhists have found a great deal in common with Jung's findings.

Furthermore, visions play an important part in the commencement of Vipassana meditation—at least as I was taught to practise it—and dreams and visions are basic in the integration process as taught by Dr Jung. It is therefore natural to seek for some underlying similarity between Jung's methods and those of Vipassana meditation.

Yet Jung has stated that Western man should not try to learn meditation or yoga (yoga being the joining or yoking of what is subject to change and decay, to what is changeless and deathless) but must develop a technique of his own which will be essentially Christian. He asserts that Western man, being extraverted and regarding the outer world as the reality, may not ape the methods of Eastern man who is essentially introverted and finds reality to be within ('within this fathom-long body are the world and the origin of the world and the ending of the world'). The need of the Westerner, he says, is to let the subconscious speak for itself, bringing it into the light of consciousness by contemplating dreams and visions, whose archetypal forms and symbols bring deliverance from inner discord.

At the Maha Bodhi Vipassana meditation centre we were told to look at visions for the first three to five days. But as soon 'as visions with lights' were seen, to ignore visions altogether. Dreams and visions are substantially the same, but visions usually have light and colour, whereas dreams are sometimes only in black and white.

Is the way of the Westerner different from that of the Easterner? Should a Westerner not try to learn meditation or yoga?

Everyone is constituted differently, and I can of course speak only from my own experience. But the question was of particular interest to me, because about fourteen years before the first visit to a Vipassana centre I had started writing down dreams and visions consequent on reading some of Jung's books. (See

especially his *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, *Psychology and Religion West and East* and *The Secret of the Golden Flower*.) The practice was undertaken purely out of idle curiosity. But after about six months there was a sudden flash of understanding on a whole series of dreams. The result was most humiliating, for it revealed the shadow-side of the psyche. However, there was no alternative to accepting it. Within twenty-four hours nervous dyspepsia and nausea, which had made life nearly unbearable, disappeared completely. The festering sore of egoism and discord between conscious and subconscious had been lanced and there was relief physical as well as mental. A considerable time after this there was a startling vision of the archetypal kind which I interpreted as the cross of suffering from which sprang the wings of victory. According to Jung's theories, this should have brought a marvellous mental healing power. But I cannot remember anything of the kind. It certainly did not end the darkness of the spirit, nor did it obviate the need for ceaseless training afterwards. After the return from the second visit to the Vipassana centre, I again started noting dreams and visions. They were interesting, especially the one which showed the development of the first vision seen on the first visit; and it was gratifying to observe that the previously empty candlestick now held a brightly burning candle against a background of pure white. But so far as I could see, observing these dreams and visions was now merely a distraction and a waste of time.

Aldous Huxley in his *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* has been at pains to show that visions can be brought about by drugs, vitamin deficiency and excess of carbon-dioxide. The visions of mediaeval contemplatives, he says, were almost certainly the result of a defective diet coupled with long fasts. Revivalist meetings with shouting and dancing (when more oxygen is exhaled than inhaled) may have the same result. He also suggests that the absence or presence of certain chemicals in the blood stream may open the doors of heavens and hells. We cannot deny the possibility of the correctness of these contentions, for everything from the most sublime to the most ridiculous must come into consciousness through the grey matter

of the brain. How it gets there does not necessarily lessen its validity.

Therefore, although Huxley's contentions may be correct, that is no reason for lightly dismissing Jung's findings concerning the importance of dreams and visions in making for integration and peace of mind. Further, the nervous tension and inner discord, for which he has found the contemplation of dreams to be a remedy, are very common among Westerners, but practically unknown in the East especially among Burmese people. It would therefore seem that Jung is perfectly right in insisting that the average Westerner must commence by ending the estrangement between the conscious and subconscious elements in his psyche and accepting the darker side of himself. This reconciliation would seem to be most easily brought about by the contemplation of dreams and visions. Hence it is tentatively suggested that most Western aspirants to liberation should devote at least some months to noting dreams, perhaps simultaneously with relaxation and anapana (or contemplation of breathing). Finally, he probably should not cease this practice until he gets the archetypal variety of dream or vision.

These archetypal dreams or visions are very likely what my Instructor in meditation referred to as the 'visions with the lights'. Before they come the meditator is not to start the practice of striving to dissolve the ego into its elements, which is the essence of Vipassana meditation. Probably both to the Easterner and the Westerner alike these dreams or visions of the archetypal variety mark the first stage of regeneration. The Westerner will take a great deal longer to reach it; that as I see it, is the only difference. After that, it would seem that for both alike the serious work must now commence. That is to say, Jung's methods of dream-contemplation cannot end in true liberation from suffering. The aspirant has still a long way to go, and that way will be found only by learning to gather in diffuseness of thought through the practice of meditation.

Jung has two other reasons as to why the Westerner should not practise meditation.

The first objection is our divorce between philosophy and science. This is seen, for example, in the obliviousness of the ordinary University psychology textbook to such things as loving-kindness and awareness of what is Beyond the comprehension of the six senses, as if these things were not just as much contents of the human mind as anger and jealousy. This divorce between science and philosophy, he says, prevents Western man from letting go and trusting in his own nature, the very nature of things as they are, or the Dhamma, as Buddhists would say. The first need of the Westerner is to stop trying to work things out intellectually and let the psychic processes grow in peace.

This seems obvious. But all it amounts to saying is that the Westerner must spend more time in learning to 'take refuge' in a Power not self. Contemplating dreams and visions may or may not help him to do this. My own experience was that a far greater help was the ceaseless repetition of a mantra carrying with it the suggestion of trust and confidence. The Buddhist Three Refuges is a perfect example of such a mantra, though it would not suit the ordinary Westerner.

Jung's second objection to the practice of meditation by the West is our addiction to material wealth and material values. It is true that it is far easier for 'a yogi seated on a gazelle skin' to practise meditation than for 'anyone in Mayfair or Fifth Avenue', or 'within reach of a telephone'. But to assert that we must therefore never adopt Eastern methods, but evolve a Christian technique of our own, is to forget that it was Christ, not Buddha, who said it was easier for, a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In this respect the way taught by Christ was no different from that taught by the Buddha.

It may be that our material values will forever prevent us from practising meditation successfully. But that does not mean there is any other way to liberation. Nor does it mean we can escape the unpalatable truth that it is not possible to pass beyond the very elementary stages of integration and liberation from suffering unless we can become detached from 'the things of this

world' including the attractions of Mayfair and Fifth Avenue and also our beloved intellectual talking.

That is the price that is demanded if we would find freedom from pain, and the birth of peace and happiness—the complete detachment from earthly pleasures and the things of this world. And these things range from the cruder desires of food and sex to the more subtle desires for art and music, for good health and even 'worthy causes'. It is the eternal paradox that he who would find his life must first lose it, or as the Buddha said we must find disgust for life before we can find zest, calm and happiness in life.

The contemplation of dreams and visions is not a way whereby we can avoid paying the price for the transcendence of suffering. Dreams and visions are still within the pairs of opposites, where there cannot be harmony without discord nor pleasure without pain. The spiritual Teachers alike of both East and West have shown the need for transcending these pairs of opposites altogether.

Vipassana meditation is a type of jnana yoga which has not been examined by Jung, although he has examined quite a number of other aspects of Buddhism. It would seem peculiarly suited to the West in that it expresses a philosophic or religious method in almost scientific terminology, the contemplation of the ceaselessly changing atoms of which mind and body are composed. But when we say Vipassana meditation is peculiarly suited to the West, it should be borne in mind that the meditator is expected to lay stress on the need for loving-kindness, faith, humility and the absence of all ulterior motives. And that may be a hard pill for the scientific Western mind to swallow.

VIPASSANA MEDITATION AND THE MAKING OF SELVES

In Vipassana meditation the meditator does in fact come to see all things as ceaselessly changing elements or particles. The findings of modern science are much the same so far as relate to ceaseless change and the absence of any permanent core in

anything. It shows that all consists of changing waves or atoms, for which the term wavacles has been coined. Over fifty years ago, William James, the psychologist, found that thought and thinker were one and the same, and that there was, as it were, merely a stream of thinking. Today Jung finds that 'individual consciousness is based on and surrounded by an indefinitely extended unconscious psyche', and asks 'Whose consciousness?' and what we refer to when we say 'our consciousness'. He finds, too, that when we say 'I have such and such a desire or habit, we should more correctly say, 'Such and such a desire—has me.'

But the proof of Anatta (no-self) that matters from a practical point of view is none of these things. The proof is that if a person lives his life as if there were no self, that is, if he surrenders all feelings of selfhood, and yields to those vibrations within vibrations, there is peace, joy and happiness. He also finds that in so far as he pits his self-will against them, runs after his desires and tries to avoid his aversions, there is conflict, misery and suffering. The Buddha's teaching was essentially experimental—'What you yourselves find leads to contentment and calm, joy and peace—that is the Dhamma! That is the Vinaya!'

The trouble is that it is far easier to write essays and preach sermons about Anatta than actually to live our lives as if it were a reality. And it is the living of life as if it were a reality that alone can lead to deliverance from suffering. For, despite the fact of Anatta, there is an innate tendency to make not one self, but many selves. This tendency is inherent in all created life. We see one aspect is the disease of cancer, which is found in the lowliest of vegetable as well as the highest of animal life, the urge of cells to create a growth and life of their own. In the mental sphere psychologists have given the name 'complex' to the extreme forms, a twisting together of mental and emotional reactions into an individual entity which has a separate growth and life. Wherever we have these individual growths there is disease, misery and suffering.

The commonest of all these selves is the body-self. We say 'I' suffer when we mean certain elements within the body are in

pain. That is, we identify ourselves with the body. The making of this body-self is practically universal.

The formless selves, the twisting together of mental and emotional reactions, are more diverse. An example of the more extreme type is found in the English folk song, 'On Ilkla Moor Baht 'At' (On Ilkley Moor Without a Hat). It is the story of a mother (presumably a mother) who was worried because her son (presumably her son) was going out on Ilkley Moor without his hat, in consequence of which he would catch his death of cold, die, be buried, and turn into worms; the worms would then be eaten by ducks; his family in turn would eat the ducks and would therefore eat him—and all because he would persist in courting Mary Jane on Ilkley Moor without his hat. We laugh at this kind of complex, for the very good reason that we prefer to laugh at the folly in others rather than in ourselves, but in point of fact nearly everyone of us makes a self nearly as preposterous.

A commoner form of self is that illustrated by the story of the young Brahmin Ambattha who complained to the Buddha that when he visited the Sakyan lords on their moot hall they talked among themselves, nudging each other as if they were poking fun at him—they mere menials and he a Brahmin! The Buddha tried to soothe him by pointing out that even a quail, a little hen bird, could do what she liked in her own nest and that the Sakyans' Moot Hall was their little nest. But though complexes may be soothed, they cannot be eradicated except by training; Ambattha's wounded sell-esteem continued to assert itself.[1]

And then there is the complex or self of the lady who has identified herself with doing good to people, so that you can see the people to whom she does it by the hunted look upon their faces. Or there is the business man or woman who has made a formless self around efficiency and gets really angry when a clerk sends a letter by surface-mail instead of air-mail. Or the woman who has made a self of her femininity so that she is now genuinely terrified of spiders. Anything that causes us to get 'hot under the collar', or rouses feelings of anger, worry, resentment

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[1] See *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. I, p. 108.

or fear, is the sure sign of the making of a self. And it is these selves that are the source of suffering, principally to the maker, but also to a lesser extent to others.

Several of these selves usually exist within the one body. The self of mother-worry may exist within the same body as the self of ‘doing good’ to people, and almost always there is the body-self. These selves fade out of consciousness, but come to life again as soon as the appropriate stimulus happens to come along. And it is reasonable to suppose they come to life again and again in other bodies after the present body has been resolved into its elements. They probably account for those memories of past lives which many of us seem to have. Whether precisely the same combination of selves comes together in the same body, is more open to question.

The Buddha lived among people who had a firm and certain belief in reincarnation, a belief which is fairly universal, due no doubt to this inborn desire to create a permanent self. He did not try to alter this belief which he found around him; he spoke to people in the language and terminology with which they were accustomed and he therefore talked in a matter of fact way of other lives in heavens, hells and worlds. He himself had discovered the sublime truth of Anatta, selflessness, the absence of any permanent sell to be reborn in either heavens, hells or worlds. He did not attempt to reconcile the beliefs of the people around him with this supreme truth. It was Nagasena, the monk, who tried to do that many years after the Buddha’s death by inventing the doctrine of re-birth, as distinct from re-incarnation, that it was the character, not a self, that was reborn.

The Buddha himself had nothing to say about rebirth, but he did say, most emphatically, that to search for a permanent sell or soul among the things cognizable with the senses or the intellect is as foolish as to say one is in love with the most beautiful woman in the world without ever having seen her and without knowing whether she is tall, short, blond, dark, etc., etc. Obviously, as Krishnamurti remarked, if we had immortal selves or souls, they could not be known to the intellect which is

subject to death. So why waste time discussing what we cannot know about?

There has never been anyone as expert as the Buddha in putting new wine into old bottles without breaking them. He did not break the old bottle of reincarnation to give the new wine of Anatta.

The Buddha's teaching of Anatta is a practical one, not a theory of what happens after death. It is a practical one for the rooting out of the tendency to make selves, and for the realization of Anatta as an actual fact, so that there is no longer any urge for identification with the body, or to become worried because of personal affection, or angry because people have mistaken us for an inferior. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, it is a teaching for 'the reduction of self to zero.

All the Masters of spiritual wisdom have found in experience the need for the ending of self if there is to be liberation from suffering. 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself.' Or take the Catholic poet, Gerard Manly Hopkins:

> I am gall, I am heartburn, God's most deep decree
> Bitter would have me taste; my taste was me.
> Bones built in me, fresh filled, blood brimmed the curse;
> Self-yeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
> The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
> As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

All religions have sought to get rid of this sense of 'I' and 'mine and 'me'. Usually they achieve it in the roundabout way of submission to the will of God. In many systems of Vipassana meditation in vogue in Burma the meditator is taught after five days devoted to anapana (or contemplation of the breath) to go directly to the objective by contemplating the ceaselessly changing elements of which our minds and bodies are composed. I admit that I have not been able to find any specific authority in the Pali Canon for this deliberate switching over from anapana to contemplating the changing atoms, except the not very specific

advice to Rahula (*Majjhima Nikaya: Middle Length Sayings II*, p. 91 and *III*, p. 328). But that does not matter. It is what you yourself find leads to contentment, calm and peace, and this technique would seem extraordinarily effective in leading to knowledge of selflessness in actual experience.

But whatever the method employed—a variety of Vipassana meditation or prayer for submission to the will of God, or other, these alone cannot lift the burden that results from the making of selves, the burden of ego, and let us live our lives in accord with the fact of Anatta. There are eight steps in the Buddha's Eightfold Way, and meditation is only one. It is because many meditators do not tread the other seven that it is possible to meet people apparently proficient in meditation, who are nonetheless bubbling over with egoism and get angry, possessive, afraid, jealous and upset over trifles.

IS A TEACHER OF MEDITATION NECESSARY?

The question of greatest practical concern to the Westerner is whether an Instructor is necessary, for he almost certainly will not find one in his own land.

It is India, the birthplace of the Buddha, that is the land of the Guru, or teacher. 'When the disciple is ready the Guru will appear', and we have all heard the romantic stories of what happens when the disciple is ready. Perhaps he is buying a railway ticket when out of the corner of his eye he catches sight of a yellow robe—or a white one—drops his money, forgets the ticket and blindly follows the wearer of that robe. Then all is certain; he is duly initiated, takes his place with the small band of fellow disciples, renders implicit obedience to the Guru as to God, and thereafter leaves himself to be shaped by the Master-hand.

Of course things do not always work out quite as happily as that. I was told of a youth who was certain his Guru was summoning him to India, He sat at the feet of many Gurujis, bowed before Yogis, found a host of Paramhansas, Rishis, Himalayan Maijis; he even came upon an elephant Yogi, to say

nothing of Dragon Siddhis, and powerful Shaktis. At the end of sixteen months, he was still unenlightened, but now penniless, at length guru-less, and rejected alike by Easterners and Westerners.

The Burmese Instructor in Vipassana meditation is rather different from the Indian Guru. It is significant that at the initiation ceremonies we committed ourselves to the Buddha for the rest of our days, but as regards the Instructor we merely promised to follow his instructions with faith. Nonetheless, although the Burmese Instructor is not, as in India, regarded as the incarnation of the Dhamma, his help is considered essential.

But the Buddha said, ‘Let the Dhamma be your Teacher.’ ‘Take refuge in the Self.’ ‘Take refuge in the Dhamma.’ When we examine the ‘Psalms’ of the early monks and nuns we find that they hardly ever had a teacher of meditation. Even the theme on which they meditated was usually sell-chosen. It is true that the Buddha gave the theme of a skeleton to Singala-Pitar (p. 22) and of a snow-white napkin to Cuja-Panthaka (p. 258). But as a rule this was not the case. There is nothing in the Psalms of the Brethren and Sisters to suggest that an Instructor was necessary.

But, on the other hand, mundane subjects are obviously easier to learn with the help of a teacher in the flesh. It is true that a few people, like the cinema proprietor in Mandalay, can learn the most complicated things from books alone, but these people are rare. Probably much the same applies to meditation. And I certainly learned more myself from U Thein at the Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre than in many years previously. There is, however, this vast difference between a mundane subject and meditation, that given the necessary ability, the learning of a mundane subject is merely a matter of hard work. Hard work is also necessary to learn meditation, but here there is always the Inner Light, the very nature of our being to guide and direct. And this guidance seems more and more obvious in so far as we give up our desires. Whatever other guidance is necessary will come; it may be in the form of a human teacher or in the form of a book. And one has to remember that there were no books when the Guru-tradition arose.

Further, while there are thousands of excellent teachers of such things as mathematics and geology, there are very few sufficiently liberated people qualified to be safe instructors in meditation. Indeed, some of the Gurus and Instructors one encounters are arch-egoists, and sooner than follow their directions, it would be far wiser to trust to books and to the Light that is within.

SUGGESTED FIRST EXERCISE FOR WESTERN MEDITATORS

As has been said, many Westerners should probably contemplate and record dreams and visions for some months at the same time as they commence to learn to meditate, and perhaps they should wait until the first bubble of egoism has burst before they set aside a long period each day for meditation. The following exercise is to gain relaxation and concentration. The Vipassana practice will follow, probably of its own accord.

The first need is to learn to relax. Therefore lie on the back on the floor on a rug with the head cradled in a low cushion whose corners should be drawn over the shoulders. A very small roll may be placed under the knees and also under the small of the back if so desired. Then speak firmly and courteously to each part of the body from the soles of the feet to the top of the head, telling it to relax and let go. Lastly, tell the brain to do likewise, and to assist it, let it look at some pleasant happy scene or object which suggests tranquillity and joy. Look at this and enjoy it in every detail. For example, look mentally at a pure white water-lily, whose leaves lie trustingly upon the waters of a wide lake, rising and falling as the waters rise and fall, attached to nothing and prepared to meet alike both the gentle breezes and the raging storm. Picture the tired heart lying thus trustingly upon the bosom of all being, rising and falling with the joy and pain that come like sun and shade, attached to nothing, and with a faith and confidence that has no ill will towards either calamity or suffering or unkindness, and has complete trust in the Law that holds all things within its sway.

When the body is so weary it seems impossible ever to get up again, it is really relaxed. Sleep may now follow, and for Westerners who have lost the art of sleeping this should be allowed to have its way.

But sleep is not meditation. Some meditators can lie on the back without sleeping. If so, you may continue to lie. But if not you should now sit up with the back straight.

Next take refuge in a Power not self, the power that heals the broken bone and the cut finger, the very nature of our being which alone can bring the meditation practice to fruition.

You now suffuse everything with loving thoughts beginning with your own silly stupid self, admitting its mistakes and failures and not pretending any longer that it is superior to other people and forgiving yourself for being the imperfect being you are. The thoughts of love are then widened to embrace those near and close; you forgive them also for their failures and imperfections. The circle of loving-kindness widens to embrace strangers and those who are vicious and cruel; they, too, are forgiven and you hope that they, too, may be happy. Finally, the whole of the lower orders are drawn into that circle of harmony made by loving thoughts. Having extended love to all, you now very humbly ask the love and forgiveness of all whom you yourself have injured. May they forgive you and be drawn into one great circle of harmony.

Having cleared the ground you once more take refuge in the Power not self, and commence looking mentally at the breath coming in and out of the nostrils, enjoying the feel of it, and keeping in mind this movement of in and out, creation and destruction, as one with the ceaseless rhythm of the universe of which you are a part. But that is a thought merely to be kept at the back of the mind; the main centre of attention is on the breath at the nostrils. At the end of the half-an-hour or one hour you distribute to all the benefit of the peace you have found, and once again take refuge in the Power not self.

The period set aside for meditation must always be the same and nothing whatever must be allowed to interfere with it. It

must be treated as important as if life depended upon it—as in fact in a sense it does. Dr Rebecca Beard in her *Everyman's Mission* tells how one of the periods she set aside coincided with that during which an assistant was cooking the dinner. If the assistant went away and the potatoes started to burn dry, Dr Beard would remind herself that there were other saucepans and other potatoes but only one Kingdom of Heaven. She would stay where she was and let them burn. The place chosen, too, should as far as possible be the same, for memories bring concentration more easily.

Between the periods of meditation it is essential to have some form of mantra to be repeated when you are not doing anything else. For the Westerner probably for many years this mantra should carry with it the idea of trust and faith, for trust and faith are an attitude of mind even practising Christians seldom know anything of. A Christian might take a text such as 'Casting all your care upon Him for He careth for you'. An agnostic might take something such as 'I take refuge in That which holds all'. Only when faith is firmly established is it safe to change the mantra to import transience, creation and destruction. 'The coming-and-the-going' might be easier for the Westerner than saying 'phyit-pyet', the mantra which Vipassana meditators are advised to repeat.

For periods when engaged in doing something, the rule is to be ceaselessly mindful—mindful of the teeth chewing the food, of the muscles moving the foot when walking, of the words being uttered, of the emotions that come into consciousness, of the thoughts that come into the mind. Mindfulness means observing what is happening without formulating any judgment as to goodness or badness. It means, too, the end of day-dreaming. It means living in the present instead of the past or future.

There should be no haste to pass from contemplation of the breathing to contemplation of the changing atoms of which mind and body are composed. Indeed, many methods of Vipassana meditation never deliberately switch over at any time. Under these methods it is found that knowledge of the changing atoms

comes into consciousness of its own accord while still contemplating the breath. When the change is made visions must be ignored.

Whatever the method used for stilling the thoughts, it should constantly be borne in mind that the ultimate object is not to attain the bliss of Samadhi for the meditator, still less to attain supernormal powers. The ultimate object is to live life here and now amid the trivial round and common task with zest, calm, peace and happiness for the well-being of all.

APPENDIX

VIPASSANA MEDITATION:

ACCORDING TO THE LEDI-SAYADAW METHOD

As practised at the Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre, Mandalay, under Instructor Saya U Thein.

Translated from the Burmese by Sayalay Daw Saranawati, in collaboration with Marie Beuzeville Byles.

Checked by U Tun Tin, in consultation with Saya U Thein.

INTRODUCTION FOR WESTERNERS BY THE COLLABORATOR

This is not a literal translation, but each sentence has been studied to make it not only acceptable to English ears, but also true to the Burmese original and in keeping with the simplicity and repetition of the original which is designed for the ignorant peasant as well as for the educated. Buddhist terms and phrases have been left as they are and the Westerner must interpret them according to his background, religion and individual need. The method of Vipassana meditation having for its object deliverance from suffering here and now, is not restricted to those of Buddhist belief, and it is perfectly easy to adapt it for those of other religions or no religion.

But on this account the Westerner should not conclude that the ritual can be omitted altogether. The attitude of mind that lies behind this ritual is basic, especially the attitude of relaxation embodied in taking refuge in a Power not self, the Power or Law which heals the cut finger and knits the broken bone. Indeed, before each meditation period, the meditator should yield himself consciously to that Power. He should also suffuse all with loving thoughts, especially those who have injured him, and should in return ask the love and forgiveness of all whom he has injured. In other words, no meditation period should be begun

without consciously clearing the ground, as it were, nor ended without consciously distributing the benefit or merit among all.

U Thein states that it is not necessary to wait until all the types of vision have been obtained, nor to attain the jhanas whose aim is principally the acquirement of supernormal power, not deliverance from suffering. All that is necessary are visions that indicate a reasonable degree of concentration or samadhi. Usually these appear within three to five days. At the Maha Bodhi Centre ten days was the minimum period of residence, five for samadhi practice and five for vipassana.

Westerners, who would not dream of talking about their physical complaints to their spiritual instructor, should be warned that in the early stages, sometimes as early as the first day, some meditators develop bodily upsets of quite a serious nature, such as vomiting, looseness of bowels, albumen in the urine, even dysentery. These may be regarded as the attempt of the elements to throw off impurities. But whatever the explanation, there is no need for worry. Bear with the pain or discomfort and in a few days it will pass.

I have not been able to find any reference in the Pali Canonical Suttas (i.e. the earliest records of the Buddha's teaching) to the Buddha advising the need for an instructor, but several to his insistence on letting the Dhamma be the teacher. In my opinion, if the right instructor cannot be found—and the Westerner is most unlikely to find such in his own country—that is no reason for not starting to learn to meditate. If an instructor is necessary, the Dhamma, the Law of our being, will bring such. There is no need to go in search.

All religions have as their ultimate objective the elimination of ego, the denial of self. But whereas the others go a roundabout way to achieve this, such as by submission to the will of God, Buddhism, through the practice of vipassana meditation, goes direct to the objective by meditating on the scientific fact that everything consists of atoms in ceaseless coming and going, including everything that constitutes our bodies and minds. Auto-suggestion, the sceptical Westerner retorts. If you prefer the term auto-suggestion to vipassana meditation, by all means

use it. If it delivers the auto-suggester from the burden of selfhood, it is a very good ‘auto-suggestion’.

M. B. BYLES

VIPASSANA MEDITATION

Veneration to Him the most Exalted, the Purified, the Supremely Enlightened Buddha.

The following verses were written by Ledi-Sayadaw’s disciple who is known as Thebyu-Ledi Sayadaw.

Adoration to the Lord Buddha who preached Vipassana to all beings.

1. PHYSICAL

The four elements of which all things are composed are solidity, fluidity, energy and motion. When these four elements exist there also exist colour, smell, taste and nutriment. These eight are inseparable and known as one. They are composed of atoms invisible to the sight. When they come together in their thousands we get the characteristics of hardness, softness, lightness and heaviness, small and large, liquid and solid, etc., and then they take shapes and forms and become phenomena known to us, thereby concealing their inherent composition. These names and shapes deceive us as to their true nature. This deception is known as ‘wrong view’. Despite these shapes and forms, phenomena still keep the initial characteristics of their original elements in their pairs of opposites, e.g. hot and cold, soft and hard, liquid and solid, motion and stillness.

According to our karma, the deeds we have done, our mental attitude, the temperature within and without our bodies, the food we eat, so are our bodies, and every moment they are ceaselessly changing, even as fire or the flow of water.

Outside our bodies there are earth, water, trees and all else. All these are composed similarly and all these are similarly changing, but these things are affected mainly by heat and cold.

When the elements come together we give them various names and also place them in classes and categories. The ultimate Truth is concealed by these shapes and forms. But if we see things with inner sight (Vipassana) we see them as they really are, that is to say, transient and forever passing away. This is the work of gaining higher knowledge and this is the work we are about to undertake.

2. MENTAL

There are six senses, five belonging to the physical and the sixth (intellect or mind) belonging to the mental. With each of these we have the organ of sense and the object of the sense, or the form belonging to it. Consciousness is that which joins them. e.g. The eye, and the object the eye sees, are joined by consciousness. But no sooner are they so joined than they are dissolved—as quickly as a flash of lightning—phyit-pyet, come-go, in-out, creation and destruction. It is the same with the ear, etc. The first five belong to the physical and the last to the mental.

FIRST STEP

The first thing is to see that we are made up of only physical and mental component parts. Besides these mental and physical component parts there is nothing, nothing such as man, woman, soul or self. These are only names. If we learn to see with inner sight (Vipassana) we find that all things are composed only of the four elements.

We are not perceiving the real truth if we say 'I sit', 'I stand', 'I hold', 'I go', 'I hear', 'I look', 'I know', etc. These actions are the results of movement of the elements. It is thinking that it is 'I' which does these things that leads to wrong view. Right view is knowing that there is no 'I', but merely mental and physical

component parts. So long as we cannot discard the wrong view of ‘I’, we must inevitably go down to the Lower Regions or lower beings. Therefore the Lord Buddha preached that, as a man with a spear near his heart would quickly draw it out, or a man with his head on fire would quickly extinguish it, even so must we put forth effort and practice meditation as quickly as possible so as to remove this terrible danger of the delusion of ‘I’.

These six senses are divided into two groups—the physical constitute the first five and the mental the sixth. If we take one of them and meditate fixedly upon it, we come to see clearly that it is composed only of the four root elements, and that these are the basic component parts of all things. By this means we come to understand by inner sight (Vipassana). When we see colours and forms we are deceived. But when we look at them with inner sight they resolve into the four elements. If we go on looking they dissolve away entirely, for all are impermanent.

The six sense organs, the objects of sense and the contact of consciousness are ceaselessly changing. There is a stream of thought, as it were. Now, in your meditation, try to grasp it. You see at once the impermanency of any individual part, for even as you try to grasp it, it is gone. In this manner you come to see that these six senses and the objects of the senses are all impermanent, and this knowledge leads to the further knowledge that you are selfless, and that all things are only physical and mental, made up of the four basic elements. At this stage you come to Right View, that there is no ego. When temporarily you have got rid of the false conceit of ‘I’, you are known as a first degree Sotapanna. When you have permanently discarded the false conceit of ‘I’, you are known as a higher degree Sotapanna. You can then no more pass to the Lower Regions, but must inevitably go forward towards Nirvana, like Visakha. When you are thus on the direct way to Nirvana, do not run after sensual pleasures like those who are not. You are fortunate to have your feet upon the Path and you should put forth your best efforts through meditation to cut the circle of birth and death, and find deliverance from suffering.

WORK OF MAHA BODI—THE METHOD OF VIPASSANA MEDITATION

INITIATION CEREMONY

May the Dhamma long survive.

I reverence the Buddha. I reverence the Dhamma. I reverence the Sangha. I reverence my teachers. (These should always form the commencement of meditation.)

I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dhamma. I take refuge in the Sangha.

I take the precepts of: Non-killing; Not taking what is not given; Chastity; Truthfulness; Not taking intoxicants; Not eating after noon; Avoidance of shows, dancing, music; Avoidance of sleeping on high and luxurious beds. (Note: the lay meditator when not at the Meditation Centre will take only the first five precepts with an appropriate modification of that relating to chastity.)

I suffuse all beings with loving kindness.

I distribute the merit of the work I am to do.

I earnestly seek that as a result of my work I may attain Nirvana.

I worship the Buddha with the body which is impermanent.

I worship the Dhamma with the body which is suffering.

I worship the Sangha with the body which is without self.

Invocation to the Five Benefactors

May the Lord Buddha rest upon my head

May the Dhamma rest upon my head

May the Sangha rest upon my head

May my parents rest upon my head

May my teachers rest upon my head

Innumerable are the benefits which these five have bestowed upon me.

I yield myself to the Buddha and to the teacher.

Oh Lord Buddha! I yield my body to Thee for the remainder of my life. And as regards the teacher, I determine to carry out his instructions. (Repeat this three times.)

REQUEST TO THE TEACHER FOR THE MEANS FOR CONCENTRATION (SAMADHI) OR FOR ATTAINING INNER SIGHT (VIPASSANA)

(*as the case may be*)

(The ceremony for the first and second initiation is the same, for Samadhi is the first, for Vipassana is the second.)

Oh Lord Buddha! Give to me the MEANS FOR ATTAINING CONCENTRATION or FOR CUTTING THE CEASELESS CYCLE OF BIRTH, DEATH AND REBIRTH AND FOR FINDING DELIVERANCE FROM SUFFERING AND NIRVANA (use the appropriate phrase). (Repeat this three times.)

Vow of the Ariya (the Wise who tread the Eightfold Path)

I have faith that by following this means for CONCENTRATION or VIPASSANA (as the case may be) I shall attain the four blissful stages of sainthood and that I shall eventually attain the peace of Nirvana. (Repeat three times.)

I extend loving kindness and forgiveness towards all those who have injured me in deed, in word and in thought from the beginning of time up to this present moment.

And in return I humbly ask (the meditator should bow to the ground) the loving kindness and forgiveness of all whom I have injured in deed, in word and in thought from the beginning of time up to this present moment.

Method

The method which follows was given by Instructor Saya Thet who was Ledi Sayadaw's disciple. He came from the village of Dalla Pyawpwegyi.

BREATHING METHOD FOR CONCENTRATION (SAMADHI)

(How to do the breathing exercises)

In the Burmese religious books, forty methods are mentioned which you may choose and meditate upon. Of these the Ledi Sayadaw liked the breathing method best for the following reasons. Firstly, by the breathing method one can attain mindfulness on the body, supernatural powers, Vipassana or inner sight, detachment from worldly things and the four stages of sainthood. Secondly, the Buddhas attained sainthood through practising this method. Thirdly, all these Buddhas kept on practising this method throughout their lives. Fourthly, it is the easiest method and can be practised at any time. Further, the Lord Buddha frequently praised this method as the best. The Commentators, too, called this method, that of the Ariya, the Noble Disciples.

The method of contact is the easiest means to concentrate

The breathing exercise may be done in four different ways:

1. Counting as the breath is breathed in and out.

2. Watching mentally the passage of the breath from the nostrils to the abdomen and back.

3. Watching the rise and fall of the abdomen.

4. Watching the feel of the breath coming in and out of the nostrils. Of these the fourth is the quickest way to gain concentration (samadhi). (The quotations from the Pali which follow are omitted.) The Commentators repeatedly mention that both in theory and practice the first three are contained in the fourth.

Preliminary before meditation

Revere the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) and the Five Benefactors (previously mentioned).

Meditation may be practised in any of the four postures: sitting, standing, walking, lying. But more time should be spent in sitting, because in sitting you gain concentration soonest and set your mind at peace. A meditator should choose a suitable place where there is no noise. He should sit in a position he can retain for a long time. (In Burma) The men sit cross-legged and the women sideways (on the floor). The back should be straight and the hands on top of each other with the thumbs touching. The meditator should have a white scarf. Never be stiff. The mind should not be strained. If the legs are pressed hard on each other, you will not be able to sit long. Keep the eyes gently closed.

Practice

Breath regularly and naturally as is normal to you, and keep your mind on the tip of your nose, noticing the air as it comes in and goes out. Keep your mind steadfast on this and do not let it wander. In your mind be conscious that the breath comes in and goes out. If the breath is not distinct enough, draw a longer breath. If you feel tired, draw a slower breath, but this tends to make you sleepy. If it does so, speed up the breathing. If you persist in this practice, then, as the hunter who is first tricked by the animals but who eventually learns how to outwit them, you likewise will learn how to outwit the straying thoughts.

If you get too stiff, change your position, but be mindful the whole time as you do it. Sometimes the breath will go very softly and slowly as if you had no life in you, and you may feel as if you had slept for a few moments. This is caused by not being very mindful. The Visuddhi Magga calls this the first step.

How visions appear

When practising this method of concentration on the breath at the nose, after three, four or five days, twelve kinds of visions may appear, and out of the twelve one will last from one to ten minutes. You cannot keep it longer. Return to concentration on the breath at the nose. Do not go after these visions or let your thinking be influenced by them. Do not expect them to come again. They are merely distractions.

Second kind of vision

If you continue with your practice you may see a second type of vision such as the following: a column of smoke, a cyclone or willy-willy, bright fireworks, a necklace of pearls a chain of diamonds or emeralds, the light of a star or moon or planet, flashes of lightning, heaps of fluffy cotton, a breeze passing over, streams of seeds from a tree, a pillar of wood, garlands of flowers falling, smoke rising, a spider's web, clouds drifting across the sky, a lotus flower, a wheel of a cart, a moon with halo, the sun's rays. Some have visions of forests, mountains, oceans, different scenery, pagodas, rest houses, caves, monasteries, images, buildings, mansions, meditation huts, or other things to do with meditation such as the rosary, Buddhas or arahats—all these may be seen by the meditator, but the meditator should nonetheless go on meditating on the breath at the nose. These temporary visions are called Uggaha.

Third kind of vision

Out of all the foregoing visions one will have light and be the size of a small or big lime, six inches away from your eye. The vision will come and disappear. You try to fix it, and ultimately it will remain fixed and be shining like a mirage. Fix it until it remains steady. This is called Vitakka, the first stage of the first jhana. As you go on practising it may become brighter, like an electric light, the sun or the moon, and you feel coolness. In Pali this vision is called the Patibhaga. When you see this vision in a fixed manner you come to the second stage of the first jhana.

Then you see the vision again and the light gets brighter and a feeling of joy comes; this is the third stage of the first jhana. After this the fourth and fifth stages of the first jhana follow. At this stage the concentration is called Upacara Samadhi. As you go on fixing your mind the vision and yourself become one. Then the five stages of the first jhana are complete and you are stiff and still. This stage is called Appana Samadhi.

VIPASSANA

After following the aforementioned practice for from three to five days, and having seen the visions with the lights, the meditator has attained sufficient mindfulness to proceed with the practice of Vipassana meditation.

What the second ceremony for Vipassana initiation means

It is like railway engines shunting. They change from one line to another. Here you are changing from Samatha (or tranquillity) (distinguish from Samadhi, mindfulness and concentration) to the Vipassana or insight, line. That is to say, you now start to learn to perceive that all the physical and mental phenomena within your body are constantly changing, and that they are impermanent— phyit-pyet, come-go, in-out, creation-and-destruction. Becoming aware that all is phyit-pyet is called Vipassana or inner sight.

In the second ceremony, like the first, you worship the Three Jewels, take the precepts, and yield yourself, etc., etc. You must have faith in the method and an earnest desire to follow the method. You must also be anxious to be delivered from the sufferings of the world, be humble and without pride, have loving-kindness and a pure mind in deed, in word and in thought.

Practice

The best position to start with is the standing one, but if you cannot stand you may sit. While standing (or sitting) you keep your mind on the breath at the nostrils and see it as coming and going while at the same time bearing in mind that it is

impermanent. Do this breathing exercise from ten to fifteen minutes. Then change your mindfulness from the nose to the middle top of your head on an area the size of a silver coin. Fix your mind on this and do not let it wander. Just as through a microscope you can see small objects clearly and much enlarged, so in Samadhi you can see the four elements in your body.

Warning

When this practical work is done you should have an instructor because, although this Vipassana meditation is very simple, it is hard to practice when there is no one to show you. Although you know how, without an instructor you will probably not succeed. The Lord Buddha said that if one wishes to succeed one should seek a good instructor.

SEEING PHYIT-PYET (COME-GO, IN-OUT, CREATION-DESTRUCTION)

in Physical and Mental

There is a saying that when you go in search of the Dhamma, there is no need to search without. It is within.

While keeping your mind fixed on the top of your head, you may have a slight feeling of coolness or warmth there, or it may feel heavy or tight. Do not let your mind go off this spot. It may then become itchy or trembly, or feel as if swelling. Whatever the feeling, keep your mind fixed on the spot.

After some time the spot will widen and enlarge and spread down the head and over the whole body. In some people this extension may be quick, in others slow. Whether quick or slow, try to follow it with your mind whichever way it goes, thinking phyit-pyet.

Whenever you commence meditation you must fix your mind on that spot at the top of your head long enough to see the phyit-pyet of the four elements. Then only should you extend the area of consciousness to your whole head and to see the phyit-pyet distinctly. From the head you should now extend your

consciousness down your whole body to the tips of your toes. While doing this you may find that in some spots the feeling of heat or cold or phyit-pyet may be distinct, and in other parts only faint. Concentrate on whichever place you feel it distinctly and the others will follow. When you are conscious of the phyit-pyet over the whole body you get the knowledge that all is only the physical and mental ceaselessly changing and that this is their natural state. The longer you practice the more this ceaseless change will embrace the whole body without a pinpoint escaping.

The Dhamma can be found within the physical body

When you first start practising Vipassana you are aware only of material objects, and in the case of human beings you think of them as man or woman, or you think of their forms as living beings. In your own case you will notice different parts of your body such as arms, legs, etc. Later on you will not distinguish one part from another. All will be phyit-pyet. But do not be disappointed if this does not come all at once. Rest assured only that if you continue to practise this phyit-pyet over and over again, you will eventually come to know in actual experience that all is impermanent and that you will no longer think of names and forms, and know the truth that there are only mental and physical phenomena. When these truths become clear to you, you will also find the reality of impermanence, suffering and selflessness, which can be understood only when you have attained inner sight.

When you have seen the ceaseless mental and physical phenomena changing within your body, you will see the same thing in what is without your body also.

How you find the phyit-pyet

You will observe within your body as you meditate such things as heat or cold, fullness, a shudder, itching, tightness, little movements of the blood flowing as if little ants or worms are crawling over you. When you observe these things, do not move

your posture. If you feel too stiff and cannot bear it, shift very slowly but do not loose your mindfulness. If you have these feelings when in a standing position, sit down very slowly. Do not change your position very often and when you do, change it very slowly and only when things become unbearable and always allowing the phyit-pyet to continue without interruption. Further, when eating, sleeping, going, etc., be mindful the whole time.

Warning

While you are practising meditation, do not speak much, nor preach much, nor listen to Dhamma talk, nor discuss, nor question, nor read, nor recite, nor learn, nor think. If you do these things, you cannot concentrate easily.

When any contact comes, whether within or without the body, you should observe such contact as phyit-pyet. And within the whole body from head to foot you should see just phyit-pyet. Do not let go of your mind and you will experience different kinds of extraordinary happenings.

Different kinds of phyit-pyet

Within your physical body you will find the four elements coming and going and feelings pleasurable, unpleasurable or indifferent. Examples of experiences felt by meditators are as follows: flushing, movements of the blood, swelling, feeling of lightness, heat leading to sweating, chilling, slight warmth, shivering from fright, flashes like an electric shock, swaying, beating of the heart, jerking up, sharp pricks, stiffness, tightness, drowsiness, sadness, enlargement of the head, body enlarged, feeling of heaviness, or the chest being too tight, cramp, sweat, heat, perspiration.

Comparisons

When you look within and concentrate and see what is happening, you find it is like bubbles when a kettle boils, or like

foam on a river, or the sizzling of oil in the frying pan, or fizzy drinks when the bottle is opened. You will see this from the top of the head to the feet and back up again to the head—all coming and going like heat from the warmth of the body or the sparkling of fireworks, or a mirage on the desert, or a cinematograph film, or the flow of water in the stream, or clouds going and coming, or mist or snow falling or sandbanks wearing away, or a flame of fire or like a patient in a fever. Such experiences will be different to different people and it is not possible to describe them all, for they are innumerable, and each must learn from his own experience and not by reading or listening to others.

The physical changes, such as warmth and chilling, which are seen with inner sight by concentrating on the phyit-pyet are called physical phenomena. The consciousness of them is called mental phenomena. This understanding is the beginning of Vipassana or insight, the knowledge in actual experience that you are composed only of physical and mental phenomena coming and going. Other than these there are no beings, no animals, no man, no woman, no self, no 'I'. There is only nothingness.

When you realize this Truth and continue concentrating on phyit-pyet, you get the further knowledge that all is only name and form, nama rupa, mental and physical.

Warning

Vipassana is attained when, after having found the phyit-pyet in everything, you cease wanting the things of this world. You are then like the man who has been striving to light a fire with a flint and kindling. He has gone on and on and on, striking. Now at last he has got a flame.

The changes in the body such as warmth and cold, etc., are one thing. Knowing of them is the other—form and name, the physical change and the mind knowing it, no person, no animal, no 'he', no 'I'. You no longer have doubt. You have clear insight. And now by watching the physical and mental coming into existence and passing out of existence, you come to see that

all is impermanent. And because you perceive that all is ceaselessly coming and going, you do not like it, for you cannot stop this ceaseless change. And so by this means you come to the last truth, that suffering is inherent in everything. You would like to make pleasant things permanent and without suffering. But you now see you cannot do so, for they go their own way. You cannot master them for they are governed by the law of their own being. There is no ego to govern them. You therefore now see that all is without self, that there is only name and form having the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and selflessness. Thus comes knowledge in actual experience: That all is impermanent, fraught with suffering, and without a self: That all is coming and going: That all eventually passes away and disappears. When you see that all is disappearing you no longer have clinging or attachment or any pleasure in the things to do with the six senses. Your first feeling when you come to this knowledge is one of unutterable depression, the depression of knowing what you could not get in the past, what you cannot get in the present, and what you will not be able to get in the future. Life is altogether unsatisfactory; it has lost its savour and become distasteful. You therefore turn away from the things of this world.

You now go back with added zest to the contemplation of Anicca (impermanence), Dukkha (pain) and Anatta (selflessness) through the practice of phyit-pyet. You have found the will to escape from attachment to name and form, and you have now no desire, and no aversion, no hope and no anxiety. You have found perfect equanimity. You take either Dukkha, Anicca or Anatta and meditate upon it, and the stages of sainthood will follow. The foregoing depends upon purity of mind, and purity of mind depends upon the foregoing. But you may now be certain that meditation has proceeded some way towards Vipassana, and that with the help of agreeable climate, food and companions, progress will continue to be made and the four stages of sainthood attained, and also that through the perfections acquired in previous lives you will pass through the sensual world and get a foretaste of Nirvana. This is the state of insight which is the prelude to the first state of sainthood or Sotapanna. After this

you will pass to the states of Sakadagami, Anagami and Arahat. But until you actually gain Arahatship you must continue to practise with faith.

The quickest means

Vipassana meditation may be expressed as the four elements tasting, smelling, touching and cognition), and the five khandhas or graspings or aggregates (consciousness, feeling, perception, volitional energies, forms). You need not now choose the time and place for meditation. You have merely to bear in mind that all is only name and form, nama rupa, mental and physical; the physical is crude, the mental is subtle. It is easier to see the changes in the physical than the mental. The consciousness or mental is used to see the physical, consisting of the four elements.

The foregoing method of Vipassana meditation was practised by a Bhikkhu called Photila, who said, 'If a young crocodile lived in a hillock with six openings, and you closed five of them, and waited for the young crocodile at the sixth, it would be easy to catch him.' Similarly there are six organs of sense. You close five of these organs of sense and leave open the sixth, contact or touch. Here you watch carefully and perceive that there are only four elements constantly changing.

How this method came to be given

This method was given by Lord Buddha himself to a certain king called Pakkuthati (reference not given), and also to his son, Rahula (*Majjhima Nikaya, Middle Length Sayings II*, p. 9, and *Middle Length Sayings, III*, p. 328), and several other disciples. The Venerable Ledi Sayadaw gave it to U Thet, who in turn gave it to U Thein, and it is now practised at the Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre and also at various branches of that Centre.

Various admonitions

If a man is surrounded by enemies with one road of escape and he does not take it, the road is not to be blamed.

If your hands are dirty and you have water to wash them and do not use it, it is not the fault of the water.

If you have the means of being delivered from the bonds of existence by practising Samatha and Vipassana, and do not use these means, you have only yourself to blame.

When you are meditating, your movements should be restrained and you should speak very little and very quietly, and whatever thoughts are in your mind you should not speak about them. Eat little, speak little, do not go about too much, do not take too much time off. Meditate as much of your time as you can, and do not take your mind off your meditation.

The first step is mindfulness on the breath at the nostrils, and the second step is to be aware of the phyit-pyet, come-go, in-out, creation and destruction. The third is not to let your mind wander and the fourth is not to think. These are the four rules for meditation. But remember that this Vipassana meditation is a matter of actual experience, not of imagination.

Do's and Don'ts

Do not think of the past or the future.

Do not strain too much.

Do not be slack or lazy.

Do not hope and do not be disappointed.

These are the six hindrances to meditation.

Meditate only on the phyit-pyet of the present time.

Like the strings of a harp, your meditation must be neither too tense nor too slack.

When hope or disappointment appear, regard them as phyit-pyet and they will disappear.

If any of these hindrances come, say 'phyit.pyet' to it, and surely you will be freed from it.

(A Summary in verse form follows.)

RULES OF THE MAHA BODHI CENTRE

1. Speak very little and only when absolutely necessary.
2. Bear whatever others do or say to you and live in accord with each other.
3. Spend the least possible time in company and in working with others, and when in company keep to yourself as much as possible.
4. Do not sleep during the meditation periods.
5. Practise with faith the method which the Instructor has given.
6. Do not change to another method.
7. Whatever experiences in meditation you have previously had, put them aside.
8. When practising think only of the present and not of the past or future.
9. Keep to the one line of meditation and do not deviate to others.
10. Like a man trying to get fire from a flint, continue with your efforts steadily, tirelessly and endlessly, even though you die in the process.
11. Be punctual with the meditation periods.
12. Bear constantly in mind that if you are meditating ceaselessly, evil cannot enter, but that if there are intervals in your meditation, evil is liable to enter at once.
13. Meditation may be practised in the four postures—lying, sitting, standing, walking.
14. Faith, mindfulness, effort, concentration and understanding should all be equally balanced.
15. Meditators must have faith, determination, earnest desire, and hence certainty they will attain the goal they seek.

16. Meditators must be gentle in deeds, in words and in thoughts, and must be humble and without pride. And even when not actually practising, they should have constant mindfulness of the practice.
17. Meditators must take it for granted that they are qualified to make a success of the work and must have no doubt at all about the result. They must practise reverently and wholeheartedly, bearing in mind that the practice was taught by the Lord Buddha himself.
18. When the Instructor questions the meditator, answer truthfully and factually. Do not say what you think or have imagined.

TIMETABLE

If you can bear the tiny sufferings that will come during your meditation, you can become free from greater sufferings.

4 a.m.	to	6 a.m.	Two hours' meditation
6 a.m.	to	7 a.m.	One hour for breakfast
7 a.m.	to	10 a.m.	Three hours' meditation
10 a.m.	to	11 a.m.	Lunch time
11 a.m.	to	12 noon	Bathing time
12 noon	to	5 p.m.	Five hours' meditation
5 p.m.	to	6 p.m.	Interview with Instructor
6 p.m.	to	7 p.m.	Leisure
7 p.m.	to	10 p.m.	Meditation
10 p.m.	to	4 a.m.	Sleeping time

At the time of going to press news comes that Saya U Thein, sick and ailing, has at length donned the yellow robes permanently and is happy in them —'it is the Burmese custom,' he would say. But he has not left the world. Despite the doctor's orders he still teaches the increasing number who come to him, and the yellow robes have not taken away his humility, loving kindness and wisdom.

GLOSSARY

ANAPANA	Meditation on breathing—one of the principal methods of meditation in Burma.
ANATTA	Non-ego, no-self, that nothing within body or mind has a permanent self.
ANICCA	Impermanency.
ARAHANT or ARAHAT	A saint, one who has completely rooted out the asavas. Saints are of four degrees—Sotapanna, Sakadagami, Anagami, Arahant.
ASAVAS	Tendencies or biases with which we are born—to seek sensual satisfaction, including the satisfaction of the sixth sense or intellect which clings to views and opinions—to seek to perpetuate one's life both here and hereafter—to seek to remain in ignorance of the nature of things as they are, fraught with suffering, transient and without a permanent self.
DAW	A term of respect for an older woman.
DUKKHA	Pain, suffering, discord.
EIGHTFOLD PATH, or NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH	(1) Right Views—the knowledge of suffering, the arising of suffering, the ending of suffering and the way leading to the ending of suffering. (2) Right aim or aspiration—the being set towards renunciation, non-resentment and harmlessness. (3) Right speech—abstinence from lying speech, from back-biting and abusive speech and from idle chatter. (4) Right action—abstinence from taking life, from taking what is not given, from

wrongdoing in sexual matters.
(5) Right livelihood—gaining a livelihood in ways not injurious to others.
(6) Right effort—inhibiting the arising of evil and immoral states of mind not yet arisen, getting rid of evil, immoral states of mind that have arisen, causing good states of mind to arise, establishing good states of mind.
(7) Right mindfulness—regarding the body, feelings, perceptions, and activities and thoughts, self-possessed and recollected, and controlling the covetousness and dejection that are in the world.
(8) Right contemplation or meditation.

KARMA	Action—the sowing which leads to the reaping of our actions both good and bad.
MANTRA or MANTRAM	A sacred text repeated.
PALI	The language in which the Buddha's teaching was first recorded.
PHONGYI	Monk.
PHONGYI-KHAUNG	Dwelling for monks—monastery.
SAMADHI	Concentration and meditation.
SAYA	Old, venerable.
SAYADAW	The head of a group of monks—abbot.
SAYALAY	A nun of ordinary standing.
SAYAGYI	A nun of old standing.
SANGHA	Congregation—ordinarily used as referring to the Order of Monks. In the Buddha's day it included the Order of Nuns also. It may also means the Community of Noble Ones (Ariya).
SUTRA or SUTTA	A sacred discourse.

U	A term of respect for an older man.
VINAYA	Rules of good conduct governing the lives of monks and nuns.
VIPASSANA	Insight—knowledge in actual experience of the nature of things as they are—Dukkha, Anicca, Anatta.
YOGA	Union or joining. The way or path by which the self is united to the Self, is how the Hindu would describe it. The Path to the Beyond, what is Beyond the things of this world, is a Buddhist description.
YOGI	One who practises Yoga—a meditator.

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INDEX

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